Whose learning? Investigations into educational relationships in the classroom

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Submitted through Method B by

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of the University of Bath

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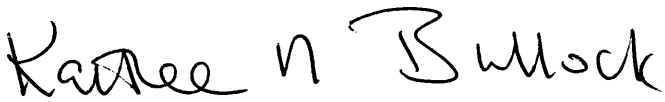

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ABSTRACT

This PhD submission contributes to the rich and enduring educational debate on learning. It comprises a selection of original, published work and relates to five research projects that have been undertaken in the Department of Education at the University of Bath over the past eight years. The nine publications have been selected from a wider list for their coherence, and contribution towards theoretical developments and original knowledge about the nature of, and influences on, the learning of young people and their teachers. Together, the eight papers and one book use observations and descriptions to explore ideas and articulate concepts that lead to a better understanding of learning. The work discusses the educational relationships and learning processes that individuals encounter in their learning endeavours.

The underpinning theoretical framework for the studies has been re-conceptualised over the span of the papers. Findings from the initial research are predicated on a Piagetian model of cognitive development that sees learning as being active, hierarchical and individual. This theorisation is then used to make a case for a process based model of complex, inter-relationships between three discrete forms of knowing. These three strands are knowing what to learn, knowing how to learn and knowing yourself as a learner. These are claimed as the fundamental elements of learning practice. However, no practice of learning is free from context. The most recent papers, therefore, expand the latter model with a socio-constructivist perspective in order to emphasise the crucial role of educational relationships in learning. This final model explains and begins to explore learning as a

social process dependent on the ongoing interactions between individuals or groups and fashioned by the prevailing culture of the organisation.

The thesis is supported by a commentary that presents arguments on philosophical, methodological and substantive issues that might be expected from a doctoral level submission but were not appropriate for the media in which the works were published. This section offers a synthesis of the findings and arguments from the papers and relates it to seminal and current theories of learning.

The contribution of this thesis to knowledge is found in an explication of the educational relationships which engage learners during the processes of learning. This is an area that bridges psychology and sociology of education. The thesis presents an original and substantial contribution to this emerging field. It might also inform government policy on life long learning but challenge current educational policies that perceive effective learning as readily demonstrated by measured outcomes. Further, it draws attention to a conceptualisation of learning that is empirically derived from classrooms and practitioners. Its relevance will be to all those concerned with the practice of teaching and learning at every level.

ABSTRACT

This PhD submission contributes to the educational debate on learning. It comprises a selection of original, published work and relates to five research projects that have been undertaken over the past eight years. The nine publications have been selected from a wider list for their coherence, and contribution towards theoretical developments and original knowledge about the nature of, and influences on, the learning of young people and their teachers. Together, the eight papers and one book use observations and descriptions to explore ideas and articulate concepts that lead to a better understanding of learning. The work discusses the educational relationships and learning processes that individuals encounter in their learning endeavours.

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The thesis is supported by a commentary on philosophical, methodological and substantive issues that might be expected from a doctoral level submission but were not appropriate for the media in which the works were published. The contribution of this thesis to knowledge is found in an explication of the educational relationships which engage learners during the processes of learning.

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1. PREAMBLE

The writing presented here as a submission for a doctoral degree by published work comprises a selection of original research and relates to five projects that I have undertaken since 1996. The projects have been selected from a longer list as those which contribute to an enduring interest in the nature and practice of learning and which have, most strongly, created and shaped the theoretical stance that I hold today. As such, they are representative of, and have informed my current research activities. All have been undertaken in my position, first, as lecturer and then senior lecturer in the Department of Education at the University of Bath. While I have preferred to work collaboratively, I have consistently taken a leading role as an autonomous researcher.

The work represents a coherent and original contribution to knowledge. My research is located in a general field that might be termed the practice of learning. My specific contribution within this field is concerned with the nature and organisation of the learning that occurs between an individual learner and a more informed other person. My line of reasoning focuses on the influence of educational relationships and explores the organisational and affective dimensions of these.

This thesis is set out in two parts. The first part begins with an explanation of the projects, their provenance, design and intentions and goes on to explore some selected methodological issues. It then presents a critical appraisal of the work selected for this Method B submission and traces the developments in my thinking over the years of engagement. In this way, it captures my

conceptualisations relating to personal learning and highlights my original contributions to the field.

Part two comprises a selection of my published work in the field.

PART 1

2. INTRODUCTION

This section introduces the research projects that were the source of this thesis and sets out the publications which I believe form a coherent and original conceptualisation of the individual relationships that underpin learning. Foremost, it aims to establish my voice, and to tease out and indicate my role in work that was both systematic and collaborative. The projects have varied in terms of duration, methodological paradigms, sampling frames, and range of data collection methods. In addition to reports for funding bodies and stakeholders, findings have been successfully disseminated through a number of published papers and one book. A number of these publications have been selected to illustrate independent critical judgement and an addition to knowledge.

The projects have been carried out collaboratively with colleagues from the Department. Like much noteworthy work in educational research, my projects have been combined efforts, enhanced by the sharing of perceptions, insights and analysis. At the same time, each individual researcher within the project has contributed to the research through personal reflection and original critical analysis. My distinctive contribution has consistently been at this level of theorisation. Articulating and sharing ideas and concepts that emerge from data is a complex and challenging task. It balances skills of divergent thinking and ability to focus on the essentials. It involves listening, reading and evaluating. My on-going efforts in educational research, I believe, have helped me to develop these abilities. Collegial and team-based endeavours act to enhance individual, independent contributions in research

design, data gathering, analysis and reporting. The synergy that results profits individual participant development, the good conduct of the research, the theorisation and the robustness of findings.

The projects are listed in Table 1 below. I have indicated above my role and share in the overall research effort. My contribution has been assessed in terms of time, effort and intellectual input. In each case, this comprised: designing the study and writing the research proposal; developing instruments and gathering the data; data analysis; writing and dissemination; and quality assurance.

Table 1

Research Projects

	PROJECT FOCUS	FUNDER	DATES	RESPONSIBILITY & CONTRIBUTION
1	Personal Learning Plans	The Department of Education and Employment	1996 - 2001	Main proposer and co-director (50%)
2	Learning from Coursework	Economic and Social Research Council	1999 - 2000	Proposer and co-director (25%)
3	Post 16 Tutorial Provision	Learning and Skills Development Agency	2001 -2002	Main proposer and research director (50%)
4	Supporting Effective Learning	South Gloucestershire Beacon Schools	2003 -2004	Co-researcher (50%)
5	Independent Learning in the Middle Years	British Academy	2003 -2004	Co-researcher (50%)

The publications presented in this thesis have been selected from a longer listing (see Appendix 1) because of their coherence of focus, their contribution to theory, and to original knowledge about influences on the learning of young people. The corpus of work is set out in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Selected Writing

Publication 1
Bullock, K.M. & Wikeley, F.J. (1999) 'Improving Learning in Year 9: Making Use of Personal Learning Plans', *Educational Studies*, 25(1) pp. 19-33

Publication 2
Bullock, K, Bishop, K., Martin, S. & Reid, A. (2000) *Learning from Coursework*, Final report to Economic and Social Research Council: ESRC Research Award No. R000222684

Publication 3
Bullock, K, Bishop, K., Martin, S. & Reid, A. (2002) 'Learning from Coursework in English and Geography' *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 32 (3) pp. 325-340

Publication 4
Bullock, K.M. & Wikeley, F. (2003) 'Personal learning planning: Can tutoring improve pupils' learning?', *Pastoral Care in Education*, 21.1, pp. 18-25

Publication 5
Bullock, K. & Fertig, M. (2004) 'Partners in Learning or Monitors for Attendance? Views on Personal Tutorials from Further Education', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 8(3) pp. 329-343

Publication 6
Bullock, K.M., *Educational Relationships and Dialogues Between Students and their Personal Tutors*, Paper presented to the BERA Conference, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester: September 2004

Publication 7
Bullock, K. & Wikeley, F. (2004) *Whose Learning? The Role of the Personal Tutor*, Maidenhead: Open University Press ISBN: 033521407X

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Publication 9
Muschamp, Y. & Bullock, K. (Spring 2006) 'Learning about Learning in the Primary School', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 36(1) pp. 97-110

Six of the journal articles above have been published in well-respected, international, refereed periodicals whose primary focus is educational research or professional development. In each of these papers, I was the lead author, contributing at least 50% of the writing effort. I identified an issue which drew on and expanded the findings that were reported to the commissioners of the research project. Nonetheless, critical comment from

colleagues was welcome and contributed to the detail. Comments from referees confirmed that the papers make an original contribution to knowledge in the field. The papers have been cited in refereed publications by others working in similar fields (see Appendix 2).

Publication 2 is a final research report to the ESRC that demonstrates the theorisation that resulted from this study. This report was written collaboratively with the co-applicant and other researchers with my contribution amounting to at least 25%. The technique here (as in other shared writing) was, first, to collaboratively identify a structure for the report and, second, to allot equally the issues to be addressed. Subsequent readings and discussions of drafts served to craft the final document. The research was favourably received and was graded 'good' by the reviewers (See Appendix 2).

The conference paper (Publication 6) is a recent work that illuminates developments in my thinking in the wake of subsequent projects. This was part of a symposium that explored educational relationships in a range of settings. The paper was lodged in the public domain at the conference and copies have since been requested by interested readers, both in the UK and abroad (Appendix 2).

The book (Publication 7) was jointly written with Dr Felicity Wikeley and has received excellent reviews (Barton, TES, 8th October 2004). This publication draws, in particular, on our research into *Personal Learning Plans*. We did not want to write the book of the project, however, and we have incorporated concepts and findings that have emerged from our other (separate) enquiries. The book explores the practice of individual learning and the processes that support it. It establishes new ways of conceptualising learning, arguing that there are three strands to successful learning. These are: learning about facts,

theories and skills; learning about the processes of learning; and learning about yourself as a learner. It argues that in any learning context, each strand needs to be addressed. Again our writing technique was to collaborate on a structure for the book and a proposal to the publishers. Chapters were then allotted to one of us as first writer. I was first author of five of the nine chapters. Drafts were passed back and forth for comment and amendment until the final version was agreed.

In Section 3, I describe the variety of the research work that was undertaken. Section 4 addresses methodological issues with which I, personally, grappled, while I have critically explored and examined my own reasoning and conceptualisations of learning in Section 5. The final sections establish the originality of my work and discuss my distinct contribution to the field

3. COMMENTARY ON THE RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

This section offers a brief resume´ of the nature, extent and outcomes of the research projects and the publications that are included in the thesis. The link between the research projects and their associated papers is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Projects and Papers

PROJECT FOCUS	Publication No	TITLE
1 Personal Learning Plans	1	'Improving Learning in Year 9: Making Use of Personal Learning Plans'
	4	'Personal learning planning: Can tutoring improve pupils' learning?'
	6	'Educational Relationships and Dialogues Between Students and their Personal Tutors'
2 Learning from Coursework	2	Learning from Coursework, Final report to ESRC
	3	'Learning from Coursework in English and Geography'
3 Post 16 Tutorial Provision	5	'Partners in Learning or Monitors for Attendance? Views on Personal Tutorials from Further Education'
4 Supporting Effective Learning	8	'Reflecting on Pedagogy: Outcomes from a Beacon School Network',
5 Independent Learning in the Middle Years	9	'Learning about Learning in the Primary School'

The provenance of the book (Publication 7) crosses the individual project boundaries, but is, perhaps most influenced by *Personal Learning Plans.*

Research Study 1: Personal Learning Plans

Context

This project was an evaluation of personal action planning and was carried out in partnership with Dr Felicity Wikeley. It was commissioned by Cambridgeshire Careers Guidance Ltd (an independent Government funded company) and funded by the Careers and Choice Division of the (then) Department for Education and Employment. The commission was won, in part, because of our experience in this area of evaluation, having just completed a similar investigation for Wiltshire Local Education Authority (see Bullock & Jamieson, 1995; Bullock, Harris, & Jamieson, 1996). The brief for the evaluation was to investigate the quality, strengths, weaknesses and added value of Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) which had been introduced into Year 9 in Cambridgeshire schools. Cambridgeshire had deliberately selected Year 9 as a good stage for the introduction of PLPs, as they were aware of the findings from the Wiltshire project (Bullock & Jamieson, 1995) which indicated that Year 11 was too late to begin the action planning process. The aim of the personal learning planning process was to promote self awareness, opportunity awareness, and the development of planning skills at Key Stage 3 through student-centred dialogue with tutors.

Cambridgeshire Careers Guidance Ltd (CCG) introduced personal learning planning to its schools in 1995 as part of its commitment to lifelong learning. Interested schools had to bid for funding and eighteen schools were awarded pilot contracts to deliver their own PLP process for the 1995/6 academic year. The schools were accountable to CCG, who in turn were accountable to the Government Office Eastern Region (GO:ER), which determined the careers company funding. In 1996/97, a further twelve schools joined the project, three of which catered for children with special learning needs.

Issues

There was some tension between stakeholders in clarifying the purpose of this evaluation. The funding body (DfEE) were concerned with gathering summative evidence to link the PLP process to improved learning while the implementers (CCG) sought formative information in order to help improve practice. In this they followed a debate initiated by early evaluators such as Lee Cronbach and Michael Scriven. Cronbach believed that the main purpose of evaluation was to provide information for the decision-making community rather than for practitioners (Cronbach, 1986). In this he was at odds with Scriven who believed that an evaluation should be based on the needs of the consumer (see Kushner, 1997). Goals, Scriven suggested, are only worth measuring if they are appropriate for consumers in the first place. However, he also claimed that consumers were *not interested in the niceties of process or programme improvement techniques* (Kushner, 1997 p. 368) and asserted that programme evaluation should be focused, not on how goals were met, but on the relative effectiveness of activities. Clearly, the focus on the 'consumer' was appropriate for this study, but Scriven's model fell short of unravelling the explanations for success - or the lack of it. Such understanding was an important part of this study. Rarely, it seems in modern evaluations is one approach sufficient. Harland would agree with this when she says:

> *Many current exercises in evaluation some of which have a very considerable impact on educational practice are totally eclectic in their use of alternative methodologies.*
> Harland (1996, pp. 92,93)

Approach

Our evaluation questions suggested the need to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. One strand of the evaluation probed changes in attitude or behaviour using an objectives approach (Tyler, 1949) and gathered longitudinal data from all but one of the thirty participating schools between September 1996 and August 1998. Surveys using a semantic differential scale

were the preferred tool. The justification for this approach was, first, that it enabled an investigation and comparison of strengths of feeling about constructs relating to the aims of the innovation (Denscombe, 1998). These constructs had, in part, been identified and formed from interview data. Second, the surveys were constructed in order to distinguish differences in attitude between sub-groups (such as school, gender and attainment) and, third, they were intended to track changes in attitudes over time. In each case, the optimum number of response options and requirement for a mid-point were carefully considered and designs matched to the nature of the findings sought from the instrument (Oppenheim, 1992).

These data were informed, complemented and extended by four sequences of in-depth interviews with an informed person in each school. These were focussed, first, to allow respondents to expand on the initial concepts established from the specifications and scrutiny of the literature in order to ensure that all aspects of the initiative had been explored, and second, to understand and interpret the perceptions of stakeholders about the whole activity and the components of it. Third, they were used to validate and focus the theories which were emerging from the explorations and to test these out.

In a further, validation stage of the PLP project findings from all the data collecting techniques were collated to identify tensions in users' perceptions. These tensions were then set out as dichotomies and used at annual workshops for tutors delivering PLP to focus group discussions in order to gather views from another perspective and to clarify issues further.

As with all the projects described here, the appropriate data collecting instruments were selected, drafted, critiqued and rewritten in collaboration with the steering groups and other informed colleagues, tested with the

sample group, and finally, redrafted and re-tested. Information from one data collecting technique was used systematically in conjunction with appropriate literature, to inform the other collections. This approach is justified by Cronbach (1982) who urged that each investigation should be fashioned to meet particular needs.

> *Designing an evaluative investigation is an art. The design must be chosen afresh in each new undertaking, and the choices to be made are almost innumerable.*
> (Cronbach, 1982, p. 1)

Outcomes

Paper 1 reflects my thinking at the interim stage of this evaluation. It highlights unanticipated findings in respect of the differential impact of the intervention on males and females. Although it is difficult to pinpoint personal learning (Eraut, 2000) the impact of one-to-one tutorials became a focus of my work during this time. Paper 4, published in 2003, challenged the view that learning can be categorised and improved by bench marking and quantitative outcomes. It discussed the values and expectations of teachers and students about their understanding of, and confidence in, learning generated through one-to-one discussions or tutorials. By September, 2004 when Paper 6 was delivered at the British Educational Research Conference, the focus of analysis had shifted to the educational relationships that are created between the tutor and the learner. The focus on educational relationships developed naturally from the theorisation underpinning this project and was supported by my work in the other enquiries I have selected for this thesis.

Research Study 2: Learning from Coursework

Context

The investigation into *Learning from Coursework* was designed in 1998. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and was carried out in

collaboration with Dr Susan Martin and Dr Keith Bishop (University of Bath). It overlapped with the second phase of *Personal Learning Plans*. This research was instigated by a previous study from the same team that used a survey approach and attitude scales to investigate users' perceptions of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (the national examination taken by nearly all 16-year olds in the UK). A paper disseminating notable findings (including the impact of coursework) from the GCSE project was presented at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) in Seville in September 1996 (see Appendix 1) and was subsequently written up for an academic journal (Bishop *et al.*, 1997). The findings relating to coursework were reported in the educational (TES, 25.9.96) and national (The Times, 26.9.96) press, sparking interest and questions which led to the writing of the proposal for the project on coursework.

The rationale for this study noted a shift in emphasis within the GCSE such that coursework was not the central tenet which had been originally intended (Schools Examination Council, 1985; Department of Education and Science, 1985). This, together with hints of anxiety (TES, 27.6.97) about the lack of creativity and critical thinking engendered by the previously lauded Pacific rim approaches to learning, suggested that deeper research into the distinctive nature of learning through coursework would be useful.

Issues

The research aimed to resolve a significant tension around coursework: on the one hand, it is highly motivating and leads both to improved examination performance and positive attitudes to learning; on the other, it can be a licence for pupils to present other people's work (Bishop *et al.*, 1997). Influenced by writers such as Ball (1995) and Gipps (1994), we argued for the need to clarify well-used, but imprecise, concepts such as independent learning, critical thinking and creativity, and suggested that an investigation into coursework

would provide an understanding of how such constructs might be embedded into the practices of teaching and learning. We saw this as an inductive study, building understanding and theory.

Approach

The design of the project was guided solely by the need to answer the research question. The complexity of the nature and processes of learning from coursework dictated an interpretivist or relativist epistemology. The use of semi-structured interviews was, therefore, favoured as the main data collecting strategy. This wholly qualitative approach aimed to generate a shared understanding and a clear view of the processes and nature of learning from coursework. It used participatory techniques (Cousins & Earl, 1995) to define constructs, and drew on case study approaches to understand the impact of coursework on effective learning in two different subject areas (Denscombe, 1998). The research team agreed that answers to the research questions would emerge from empathy and understanding of the changing consciousness of the individual, and that there was little to be gained from attempting objective observations or measurements.

An innovative aspect of this research design was the identification of a teacher researcher from each of the six case study schools. This was, in part, recognition of the importance of the contextual influences on learning from coursework and demonstrated an effort to understand these more fully. The teachers were integrated into the project as full researchers as well as data providers. For this study, it was considered that the advantage of the richness of ten disparate perceptions and experiences outweighed the disadvantage of the more involved and protracted discussions before consensus was reached.

From the outset of the project, the teachers participated as researchers, on equal terms with the University team, working on research strategy, instrument design, data collection and analysis (see Cousins & Earl. 1995). The key to integration of the teacher researchers into the study was a series of well-focussed progress and planning meetings led by the University team. These began with an overview of the research proposal and a discussion on the operationalisation of the concepts of creativity, critical thinking and independent learning. This clarification led to the design of the gathering instruments. The most efficient organisation for this process was found to be a preliminary brain storming exercise to generate a rough version of the instrument, a period of reflection on the draft and a second meeting to agree the wording and order of the final interview schedule. Records of these discussions added to the richness of the data collected and our joint understanding of the project.

In this research, reliability and validity (McNiff, *et al.*, 1996) were established by researcher triangulation and by the reiteration of emerging definitions, classifications and theories within the group of researchers. In addition, a half-day validation conference was held with parents and with informed colleagues of the teacher-researchers. In this forum emerging findings were presented as tensions for discussion and further explanation. As well as contributing to the internal and external validation of the analysis, this constituted a final round of data collection and reporting within the project itself.

The software package N.Vivo (Scholari, 1999) was used in this investigation to analyse the qualitative data. It was found that the flexibility of this package which allows descriptive coding to be linked between nodes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and integrated into the creation and exploration of ideas and building of theories supported a unique and thorough exploration of all the

interviews and discussions. Again, analysis was undertaken systematically throughout the research and findings used to inform later data collections.

Outcomes

For me, the theorisation of findings from this research highlighted two crucial aspects of learning. The first of these was the extent to which learners feel in control or responsible for their own learning, and the activities which allow this to happen. The second was the relationship between teacher and pupil that oscillated between structure and prescription, and independent activity. The crux of this tension for effective learning has been noted by others such as Gipps and colleagues (1999). The balance between teacher support and pupils' own efforts is key, and the need to explore this further impelled subsequent projects.

Papers 2 and 3 describe the conduct and findings of the learning from coursework research for different audiences. In their summative evaluation, the ESRC's reviewers rated the quality of this research as being 'good' and commented on the integrity of the data gathering techniques and worth of the analysis. (See Appendix 2)

Research Study 3: Post 16 Tutorial Provision

Context

An evaluative stance was a strong feature in this short project that sought knowledge for policy making and action. The project responded to a need in a local college of further education to identify and consolidate good practice in its personal tutorial provision. As an institution of further and higher education, the college was representative of the sector. Situated in a large town, it offered courses from Level 1 to Level 4 in a range of vocational and academic disciplines. At the time of the research, around 20,000 part-time and full-time students were enrolled on programmes. In this study, I worked with Mike Fertig, a colleague at the University of Bath.

Issues

The enquiry was influenced by a number of key reports on Further Education that were published in the early 1990s. The HMI Report (1991), Student Completion Rates was closely followed by, Measuring up: performance indicators in further education (SOED, 1992) and, Unfinished business (Audit Commission/Ofsted, 1993). All three documents provided evidence of differences in student achievement across the sector, and described measures introduced by some colleges to improve student retention and completion. In addition, the Learning and Skills Development Agency published a number of studies looking at good practice in Colleges of Further Education. One of these by Martinez (2001) involved 80 self-selected 'improving' colleges. This research found that over half (58%) had worked on tutoring issues as part of their improvement policy. In fact, improving the tutorial system was the most widely reported strategy by participants. For example, the City of Bath College, officially an 'improving college' over 5 years, cited the decision to introduce a new tutorial system as an important reason for their ability to sustain their achievements (Martinez, 2001).

Approach

The research design for this enquiry into *Post-16 Tutorial Provision* was informed by my previous work, tempered to meet the particular needs of the commissioning institution and sponsors (Robson, 2000). The aim was to scrutinise current organisation and practice relating to the role of the personal tutor in a further education college and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of tutorial provision. An additional aim was to illuminate the perceived impact of the tutorial programme on student well-being, achievement and retention. In this study, the focus was particularly on the experiences of students working towards level 2 qualifications. Findings were used more generally, however, to inform decisions leading to more

effective provision and to set priorities for staff development and the spread of best practice.

The key stakeholder groups for this study were identified as current tutors, current and former students, middle managers with direct responsibility for the tutorial programme, and senior managers with responsibility for policy decisions. Data were gathered from the range of stakeholders thus capturing diverse perceptions and expectations. Data were gathered from managers, tutors and students in three of the faculties in the College. Courses in these faculties could be full-time or part-time and met a wide range of individual student needs for academic and vocational qualifications and general education and life skills.

Outcomes

Analysis from my previous research, together with the literature perused in this study further developed my thinking about the nature of the learning relationship between tutors and students. The overall impact on the diverse student body of the one-to-one discussion in enhancing motivation and direction was considerable. It was clear that effective learning experiences arose from such individual interactions between tutor and student. These discussions between tutor and student used agreed, firm evidence about what had been learnt in order to recognise and celebrate achievements, before identifying and setting out the next steps for learning. Paper 5 explores the experiences of tutors and students and their attitudes towards the personal tutorial arrangements in this one institution. It offers a generalised commentary on tutorial provision of value to others in similar institutions.

Research Study 4: Supporting Effective Learning

Context

This research was carried out with my University of Bath colleague, Dr Yolande Muschamp. It was funded by a consortium of four Beacon Schools and centred on an initiative set up by these schools to enhance the professional development of teachers, and hence, raise pupil attainment in all schools in the local education authority (LEA). This initiative provided opportunities for teachers to work in cross-institutional interest groups with the aim of sharing good practice and reflecting on classroom strategies that would better support pupil learning. Strategies for effective teaching approaches were discussed and translated into systematic plans for small action research studies (Denscombe, 1998). The aim of these classroom-based projects was to improve practice and to solve the problem (Punch, 2005) of boys' underachievement that had been observed in the local authority and which was thought to mirror national tendencies (Myhill, 2002).

We were invited to work with the network of schools to support a variety of action research projects and the professional development of the participating teachers. This was done by providing workshops on research methods, overviews of appropriate literature and individual advice as the teachers reviewed their practice, then planned, carried out and appraised their individual curriculum initiatives.

Issues

For us, (as for Rudduck *et al.*, 2000) a key question arising from the staff development activities engendered by the Beacon Schools initiative was how (and whether) teachers used these experiences to inform and reconstruct their pedagogy. We challenged the view that action research is necessarily a worthwhile endeavour that, almost inevitably, leads to improved classroom practice and better pupil learning. Of course, robust links between any

particular initiative and classroom learning are hard to establish with certainty. However, we suggested that a clear understanding of the reflective, reconstructive and confirming processes teachers go through when taking the stance of researcher could illuminate improved practice and successful professional development. The reflections and positions taken by the teachers were examined and theorised in Publication 8. A full description of the research design is also set out in Publication 8.

Outcomes

Supporting Effective Learning had a different focus from the others presented in this thesis in that it relied on teachers' perceptions of the teaching-learning interface. However, the data gathered from primary and secondary teachers as they reflected on their own classroom initiatives to enhance pupil learning reinforced my view of the need to understand the explanatory frameworks that forge educational relationships between pupil and teacher. In addition to Publication 8, strategies and findings from the teachers' own action research studies were shared at seminars and conferences. A newsletter disseminating outcomes and developments from the work was distributed to all schools in the local authority (Beacon Schools, 2004).

Research Study 5: Independent Learning in the Middle Years

Context

This research, to explore pupils' *Independent Learning in the Middle Years* of schooling, was also carried out with Dr Muschamp and was supported by a small grant which she was awarded from the British Academy. As the study was located in the same Local Authority as the previous research, findings were used to inform both the Beacon schools and their wider networks.

Issues

In this research we set out to explore the experiences and strategies that pupils use in their approaches to schoolwork, and to examine how these

change as they move from primary to secondary school, that is from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3. The study was influenced, first, by the iterations of the ORACLE project (Galton *et al.*, 1987; 1999; 2003) that observed teaching and learning in the 1970s and again 20 years later. A major focus for Galton and colleagues was the move to individualised learning and the contingent changes in the organisational structure of the classroom. They were particularly interested in the organisational and attitudinal differences experienced by pupils at the transition between primary and secondary school.

Second, our project was influenced by moves to a more prescriptive National Curriculum which, paradoxically, also asserted that independent learning is essential to effective learning. The transformation of the curriculum within Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 is on-going. This has seen more prescribed national strategies for literacy and numeracy and the Frameworks for teaching in years 7, 8 and 9 (Joyce *et al.*, 2002). A further review of the Frameworks for teaching literacy and numeracy at Key Stage 2 was announced in 2005 (DfES, 2005a). Alongside this trend, policy makers argue for the promotion of independent learning and a personalised curriculum (DfES, 2005a). In this they are supported by researchers. For example, Osborn, *et al.* (2000) claim that approaches to teaching and learning that engage and motivate pupils and demand their active participation as independent learners are central to these initiatives, while Gipps, *et al.* (1999) claim that teachers value independence in pupils.

Third, within the teaching profession, there has been a growing interest in 'learning styles' and 'multiple intelligences'. Some schools have moved towards this pluralistic view of intelligence and a recognition of individual styles and orientations towards learning and studying (Sadler-Smith, 2001). This has led many teachers to develop a range of teaching approaches and

activities that might meet the needs of individual pupils. However, there is no overview of how these are influenced by the nature and culture of the subject area (Klein, 2003) or how different activities are spread across the framework of the National Curriculum.

It was also clear that the concept of independent learning is poorly defined (Mercer *et al.*, 1999). Not enough is known about the strategies adopted by pupils, and we do not understand how these strategies change during early adolescence as pupils move between schools (Galton *et al.*, 1999). Our study aimed to contribute to broader educational research debates, specifically those relating to a theoretical understanding of how children learn, and pupils' perspectives of effective learning.

The specific research objectives were to identify:

- the level of responsibility pupils assume for their own learning at the end of Year 6 and the beginning of Year 7;
- the skills and strategies for learning used by students in Years 6 and 7 in the core subjects;
- pupils' perceptions of promoters and inhibitors of independent learning.

Approach

The research design, again, followed an interpretive approach. It used semi-structured interviews with pupils in four primary schools feeding into two secondary schools. Interviews captured perceptions and experiences of pupils as learners in the three core subject areas. Pupils were asked to reflect on personal strategies and approaches to study used in each of literacy, numeracy and science and describe:

1. the extent of their independence as learners (for example, how did they rate their: level of interest and understanding; control of the learning

process; motivation; desire to please self or others; development and progression of responsibility?)

2. the personal skills and organisation underpinning their learning (for example, to what extent did they employ: reflection, flexibility, persistence, evaluation?)
3. their preferred styles of working (for example, do they learn more in teams or by working alone; do they learn by thinking, talking or doing?).

Six pupils from four state primary schools were interviewed individually. The schools were suburban, medium sized, and catered for a broad range of ability. One boy and one girl were selected by their teachers from three SAT levels (3, 4 and 5). Each pupil was interviewed twice: firstly, at the end of Year 6 in July 2003, and secondly, at the end of the first term in secondary school in December 2003.

Outcomes

Analysis focused on the pupils' understanding of the learning process; their views on the challenges they face; and the extent to which the current emphasis on the individual has supported their independence. Again, the centrality of educational relationships was emphasised with a need for balance between support from teachers and others and independent effort by the learner. Comments offered by pupils during the first phase of interview in Year 6 are presented, discussed and analysed in Publication 9. Further findings from this research were presented at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) meeting in Glamorgan in September 2005 and subsequently published as a book chapter (Muschamp & Bullock, 2006).

Post Script

Discussion with colleagues concerning the outcomes and theorisation from these projects has led to further work in the field.

The Impact of Educational Relationships on the Learning and Retention of Access Students

A chance encounter at the British Educational Research Conference with a colleague from a local college of further education inspired a successful bid to the British Academy. My proposal centred on the exploration of the educational relationships promoting and inhibiting the learning of students returning to learning through access courses. The study probed the students' learning histories, their perceptions of the formal and informal support they experienced within the access course, and also issues relating to completion and transition to higher education. The specific research objectives were to identify:

- the nature and expectations of students enrolling on access courses;
- factors promoting and inhibiting student well-being and progress on access courses;
- issues for access students arising at transition and after entry to higher education.

This small study was completed in October 2005. Findings indicated that while students saw themselves as the prime instigators of their return to learning (*Now I <u>want</u> to learn. It's my choice*), the relationships that were established during the course were recognised as a fundamental support for learning. Respondents acknowledged that support was needed, foremost, for guidance through learning tasks; but also to help identify, and make explicit, the tacit knowledge accumulated by the mature students in other locations and to affirm the implicit shift in the learners' self perceptions of their position in the learning community.

The relationships derived from two distinct sources. For most access students, the peer group provided a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1998) that offered shared practice in academic matters and also emotional sustenance. A major change in their access course learning experiences was the positive relationship that was established between them and the course tutors. As access students, the respondents believed that college tutors were accessible and disposed to foster student achievement (*feedback from tutors explains how you can do better*). It was accepted that this was, in part, due to the changed perceptions, motivations and maturity of the students themselves, but nonetheless the educational relationships that were described made a major contribution to early commitment to the course.

Publications from this research study are at the draft stage. In these works I will explore further the nature of the one-to-one educational relationships that are a key to learning. For example, I will consider the specific activities that form the experiences for learning and the social relationships in terms of roles, attitudes and power.

Educational Relationships and their Impact on Poverty

An investigation of educational relationships also seemed relevant to a call from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for research to explore factors impinging on the learning of children in poverty. A bid was written with Dr Felicity Wikely as the main proposer, and myself, Dr Yolande Mushamp and Dr Tess Ridge from the Department of Social Policy as co-applicants. This was one of six successful bids from over 100 applications. The study is on-going. It explores the premise that children in poverty are disadvantaged in their potential to learn by the limited extent and quality of their social networks and educational relationships. The theoretical argument suggests that children with a greater number of successful, formal and informal,

educational relationships stand a better chance of success in terms of on-going learning and rewarding employment.

The main focus of this project is the educational relationships experienced by children in Years 6 and 9 outside the prescribed school day. We are using interpretive approaches in an innovative child-centred way to probe children's agency in developing and sustaining educational relationships with adults and the constraints on their ability to use that agency in negotiating more formal educational settings. We intend to compare and contrast the educational relationships experienced by children in poverty with a matched sample of those in more affluent circumstances.

We have toyed with the benefits of using a socio-cultural approach as our framework for the analysis of data (Edwards, 2005; Engeström, 2005). At a surface level the project fits neatly. The focus of our enquiry is the out-of-school learning activities that have been identified by each pupil. The children are the subjects, and the object is their educational relationships with identified adults in particular learning situations (the activity). The interviews will explore the community of practice and the reasons for engagement in the identified learning activity. Further, they will provide an insight into young people's roles in different learning contexts and their ability to manipulate conditions, in other words, the division of labour and young people's perceived agency within this. Finally, the interviews will probe the rules, norms and values that are created or perceived by the learners in the educational relationships.

However, socio-cultural theory neglects the individual motivations and dispositions of the learners. We want to identify why children select particular activities, and to know why some children are more able to make sense of, and sustain, educational relationships. Relationships involve risk

and learning involves challenging the status quo. In addition to analysing the learning activity, therefore, we also want to build an understanding of how learners abstract from any particular educational relationship the essence of what makes such relationships successful and the skills and strategies that enhance their identities as formal learners.

Our framework for analysis is, thus, only loosely based on socio-cultural theory. In addition to providing evidence for policy makers, I anticipate that this project will make a noteworthy contribution to knowledge on learning through educational relationships.

4. CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON RESEARCH, EVALUATION AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

There is little guidance from the University about what may be expected from a critical commentary on the work presented for a Method B doctoral thesis. In this section, I have chosen to include theoretical discussions that might have been part of a Method A thesis, but which were beyond the scope of any of the individual pieces of published work presented here. I have selected issues that have interested me both in my research design and my teaching of *Evaluation* and *Research Methods*. I believe that findings from my research on learning are demonstrated in my own teaching approaches. This can be supported by my recent nomination (jointly with Dr Wikeley) for the University Innovations in Teaching and Learning Award.

Differentiating Research and Evaluation

One question that has exercised me is the difference between research and evaluation. The first of the projects in this body of work, *Personal Learning Plans,* was instigated and funded as an evaluation and there was also a strong evaluative aspect to the study of *Post-16 Tutorial Provision.* The remaining three investigations were designed, carried out and disseminated as educational research.

Within the research community, there occasionally surfaces the idea that evaluation is a less worthy activity than those forms of research that set out to

build or test theory. This, in part, can arise from the nature of evaluative studies in that they are designed to meet a perceived need in a particular situation, and so become narrowly defined 'applied' research rather than generalistic 'fundamental' research. As such, an evaluation is often a sponsored investigation, bringing with it a group of influential stakeholders with financial and political interests in the outcomes of the study.

However, the reality is that research into teaching and learning can also be distorted by vested interests or participant bias. The evaluation of *Personal Learning Plans* and *Post-16 Tutorial Provision* were similar to many other research and evaluation projects in that they each regularly reported to, and were guided by, steering groups of stakeholders with interests in the issues. While these were in part advisory, the groups also acted as critical friends or a validation forum (see McNiff, *et al.*, 1996) to guide and safeguard the ongoing quality of the research. In both contexts, these groups were careful to ensure that the integrity of the research or evaluation was not compromised by the interests of individual stakeholders.

Pole describes the fundamental research and applied evaluation dichotomy as follows:

> *The key issues here being the definition of useful knowledge and the timescale which is applied to that knowledge. Whilst fundamental research may be seen to contribute to long term educational development, applied research usually addresses shorter timescales.* (Pole, 1995, p. 139)

Timescale is invariably an important factor in evaluation. Such pressures have been explored by Wilcox (1992). He suggests that time constrained evaluation should be the preferred approach for large organisations because of the large number of evaluands and the limited human and other resources

to meet them. According to Wilcox, time-constrained approaches are fashioned by criteria of utility and feasibility which are also recognised in the American Joint Standards for Educational Evaluation (in Borg & Gall, 1989) as prerequisites for all evaluation studies. The additional two American standards are propriety and accuracy which must inevitably be applied to all sound educational research. Wilcox suggests that evaluation should use cost and time effective methods of data gathering from a range of participants in order to inform and justify decision making.

The pressure to report quickly can be less in research studies, where extended time may be needed to ensure that all aspects of the research question are explored, findings are complete, cross-linked and logical, and the educational community at large is fully informed. However, there are professional and personal benefits in habitually working to a clear timeline. All the projects reported here, whether research or evaluation, were identical in having distinct timelines set out from the start of the project that, within reasonable limits, were carefully retained. Further, *Learning from Coursework* and *Independent Learning in the Middle Years* were subject to deadlines for final reports from the respective funding councils.

The reality of the time constrained approach should be acknowledged in commissioned evaluation designs when the practicality underlying the approach is often, *What can we do for this amount of money?* rather than the more desirable educational research approach, *What is the best way of gathering appropriate data to answer this question?* While costs were undoubtedly a consideration, in particular for the most recent projects that were conducted on limited budgets, I would claim that for the evaluations

and the research studies alike, a careful matching of methods with research aims ensured that the trustworthiness of the outcomes was not compromised.

MacDonald (1976) asserts that the difference between research and evaluation lies more in the freedom of the researcher (but not the evaluator) to select questions and to seek answers in the most appropriate way. Researchers without the constraints of contract specifications or bureaucratic funders tend to prefer questions that are aligned with their personal view of reality which, in turn, informs and sustains their own particular niche or area of expertise. Recent innovative approaches to evaluation may undermine that stance, however. For example, Starr-Glass (2005) and Edwards (2005 online) have designed evaluations that reflect their preference for gathering perceptions of quality through metaphor, colour and picture.

The investigations into *Learning from Coursework* and *Independent Learning in the Middle Years* were perhaps most clearly at the 'researcher autonomy' end of the continuum. These were both initiated from observations formed during earlier studies and, subsequently, focused by reflection, discussion, and further reading. In these cases, the research questions were wholly within the remit of the researchers - myself and colleagues - and were, no doubt, consciously or subconsciously framed within our preferred approaches and ideologies. Similarly, the research design was justified, not only by the most appropriate and feasible choices, but also by our beliefs in how reality could best be represented and explored.

This position would have been accepted by Suchman (1967) who also believed that the differences between research and evaluation lay not in the methods, but in the purpose of the exercise. Research, he stated, is the discovery of knowledge whereas evaluation is intended to determine the

level to which the desired results of a programme have been achieved. However, the aims of the two evaluations addressed in this study went beyond the measurement of outcomes to illumination for understanding and improvement (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972) and Suchman acknowledges that .....

> *....evaluation of utility is intrinsically interwoven with the development of knowledge.*
> (Suchman, 1967, p. 11)

MacDonald (1976) again points out that evaluators can never be permitted the luxury of asking questions in which no one else is interested. Such privileges, presumably, are restricted to either research students or those educational researchers who are able to carry out scholarly activity with the resources readily available to them. Significant evaluation questions relating to the quality or value of what is being evaluated must be identified and the means of answering them designed afresh for each evaluation study. Hence, the assertion:

> *How much more productive it would be to define research as a branch of evaluation – a branch whose problem it would be to solve the technological problems encountered by the evaluator.*
> (MacDonald, 1976, p. 132).

Clearly, this view might have more appeal for evaluators than for researchers, and personal discussions indicate the majority of academics in the discipline of education see themselves, primarily, as researchers and evaluators, only intermittently, thus endorsing the view of Hitchcock and Hughes (1995):

> *Research can function to generate questions about teaching and learning. It can explore and test existing theories and explanations. Research can be used to open up difficult and problematic areas, providing descriptions of them, and through evaluation studies, research can focus upon the effectiveness of existing curricular and pedagogic policies and processes.*
> (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p.5)

Norris, however, argues not for supremacy of one for field over the other, but for little difference between the two, and his balanced perspective may be acceptable to most.

> *There are those who would see the difference between research and evaluation as one of purpose and degree. From this perspective evaluation is an extension of research, sharing its methods and methodology and demanding similar skills and qualities from its practitioners.*
> (Norris, 1990, p. 97)

Norris believed the difference between research and evaluation lies in generalisability. Evaluations may generate findings constrained by stakeholders to particular activities in a particular case, while research usually seeks principles relating to generic aspects of teaching and learning which will inform the community at large. While the issue of degree can be evoked by purists, in many instances, for example the projects presented here, the differences between a research study and an evaluation study can be hard to detect (see Borg & Gall, 1989). In this thesis, I would argue that all the projects were sufficiently robust in sampling technique, thick description and theorisation to ensure findings could be transferable to other settings (see Punch, 2005, p 255). The selected papers identify interesting insights surrounding the pervading theme of educational relationships and explore them in different contexts. The internal logic and consistency within and across the projects allow conceptualisation into general themes or premises relating to the nature of educational relationships and their influences on learning.

Finally, although there may be differences in relative perspectives, most writers seem to agree that the distinctiveness of educational evaluation lies in

its intention to gather relevant and timely information about activities related to teaching and learning which will facilitate judgements about quality for stakeholders and inform policy and decision-making. However one views the criteria for quality (see, for example, Harvey & Green, 1993) an understanding of it implies an illumination of what works and what does not, an identification of where the problems and successes lie, and why this might be, and also an accumulation of perceptions, experiences and attitudes engendered by the focus of investigation. Both evaluators and researchers would be energised by their wish to theorise from such rich data.

Evaluation, but not necessarily research, implies subsequent decision making by policy makers. Stufflebeam (see Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985) and Cronbach (1986), for example, believed that the main purpose of evaluation was to provide information for the decision-making community. Scriven (1996), on the other hand, stressed that the information should allow the consumer to select the most effective activity, while Hopkins (1989) proposed that evaluation should support practitioners involved in the delivery of the activity to undertake further development and improvement. The evaluative projects, *Personal Learning Plans* and *Post-16 Tutorial Provision,* provided opportunities for both decision making and improvement. Summative reports informed the funders while close liaison with practitioners in the activities took place throughout the investigations with changes in practice directly resulting from both formally and informally presented findings.

Most research, on the other hand, seeks to explain, to probe causes and effects and to inform the community in general about these. Educational research, but rarely evaluation, can derive from activities which are solely intellectual. Evaluation must be grounded in empirically observed evidence. Its authority

lies in the analysis of that evidence (Nixon, 1990). Although evaluation is initiated from an identified need for specific purposes in a particular situation, and fundamental educational research often arises from an intellectual hypothesis about the relationship between two or more variables or phenomena, the processes involved in their design and the tools in their execution are no different and equally demanding. *Learning from Coursework, Supporting Effective Learning* and *Independent Learning in the Middle Years* were designed around previously observed phenomena that merited exploration and illumination.

Philosophical Reflections

The quality of any research enquiry is judged, to a great extent, by the justification presented for the research design. It has been argued (for example Walker, 1985) that many studies lack clarity by not establishing the underlying methodological principles from which they are constructed. A preferred approach is, in turn, influenced by the researcher's predominant understanding and conceptualisation of the nature of reality. Hence, the designs of the above projects have been influenced by my epistemological standpoint.

Sarantakos (1993) and more implicitly, Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000), argue for three levels of theoretical principles for consideration - the overall philosophy or paradigm which guides the researcher in his or her understanding of reality, the theoretical approach or methodology which is developed from the accepted practices, experiences and deliberations of others in the field, and finally, the techniques or methods which are used to gather and analyse the data. While others (for example, Van Manen, 1990) would merge paradigm and methodology in their justification of approaches, for me the three-level perspective has a useful logic.

The fundamental paradigm of a research study considers the propositions or belief systems which explain how the world is perceived by those carrying out the study. This determines the criteria for selecting and defining problems for inquiry and the nature of their investigation (Husén, 1997). Patton (1987) argues that a paradigm is often a deeply ingrained, subconscious perspective which can lead to unquestioned assumptions. This view is supported by Madaus, Scriven and Stufflebeam (1996). Like the influential scientist and philosopher Kuhn, Lakatos (see Chalmers, 1982) held a view of a paradigm as a range or set of beliefs with researchers drawing on a hard core of assumptions which are inviolable. Anomalies may be acknowledged, and are contained within a belt of supporting assumptions which protect the hard core, but can be modified and adapted.

However, Husén (1997) asserts that young scientists are merely socialised into the prevailing paradigm of the social context or the community. This view accords with the work of Dreier (1999) and Lave and Wenger (1991) who have argued that learning involves a deepening process of participation in a community of practice. In my experience, this latter explanation is the more convincing. In the research projects represented here, I have found that the discussion of beliefs and evidence with colleagues has led to mutual developments in practice and adjustments in personal understandings and philosophies that moves towards a more collective interpretation. Questions of epistemology relating to the verification for the learning that accrues from coursework were fundamental to the initial discussions between the applicants for the ESRC grant while the conceptualisation of learning that is underpinned by educational relationships has also emerged from debates with my project colleagues. The *Supporting Effective Learning* project was designed on the premise that shared practice works to enhance professional

learning and development. These and similar interactions have moulded my present stance that is outlined in a later section of this commentary.

A positivistic researcher believes that laws governing human behaviour can be objectively observed, measured, and explained in a similar way to natural scientific research (see Guba, 1990; Bassey, 1990). This belief is based on the notion that there is a reality or truth which is independent of the observer, and that with enough time and effort it is possible to design a tool to capture, understand and explain the facts of that ontology. On the other hand, naturalistic or interpretive researchers contend that reality is socially constructed and can only be captured by strategies which empathise with, and enter the individual consciousness of, the players in the field.

I have long held that paradigms should be considered less as discrete, immutable beliefs, but more as extremities of a particular continuum, with reality emerging from more than one perspective. Fay (1996), for example, explains such a philosophy as *prespectivism* in which reality and knowledge exist but are viewed within the particular assumptions and preconceptions - perspective - of the individual.

While all educational researchers would agree on the authenticity of the two sets of shared beliefs set out above, and some (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Husén, 1990) would think them sufficient, others argue for the need for three (Bassey, 1990; Sarantakos, 1993) or four (Guba, 1990, Hart, 2000) dominant paradigms. Although these extended categorisations of reality do not generate the same consensus among writers as positivist and interpretivist, for example, Bassey includes action research and Sarantakos adds critical theory as third paradigms, it is clear that two are not sufficient to cover the current practices and perspectives of the majority of educational researchers. However, I have

limited this discussion to the two paradigms that have accorded with my beliefs and work.

Through reflection, my personal philosophy of the nature of reality has shifted over the span of the projects presented here. My use of a semantic differential scale as a main data gathering instrument in the evaluation of *Personal Learning Plans* reflects a more definite (than now) belief that there are some variables (for example number of incidents, personality traits, physiological responses and the like) that can be measured with an appropriate instrument. These days, I increasingly believe that the variables, constructs and ideas that are explored in a research study are privileged by one's own experiences, values and beliefs; or histories in an Activity Theory sense (Engeström, *et al.*, 2003). Therefore the aspects of the phenomenon that one chooses to explore are determined by a relativist (as opposed to a realist) stance, as are the instruments that are developed and used.

Thoughts on Methodology

Methodology, or theoretical approach, considers the distinct research principles (as opposed to philosophies) that determine or support a particular data gathering design for a particular situation. The claim to follow a distinct orthodoxy (such as case study, action research or survey) allows researcher and readers to identify with the implied systems and strategies of the research design. Guba and Lincoln (1989:158) argue that it is essential for researchers to know from which paradigm, and hence principles, they operate in order to make sense of the day-to-day conduct of the inquiry. The value of a logical and clearly argued approach has been stressed by Scriven, (1991) who warned that researchers - especially those in the broad-based, illuminative domain - can become more interested in the process than the informational outcomes.

Some educational researchers have established and maintained their reputation as the expert in a particular niche through adherence to a specific set of beliefs (Zellar, 1997). Others do not have the authority to rest on the logic of a particular paradigm and must consider the whole range of approaches and data gathering options in order to justify the quality of the evidence gathered to explore and clarify the research aims (Cook & Reichardt, 1979; Firestone, 1990). The focus and nature of educational enquiries are not only determined by personal ideology (which shapes and frames the preferred paradigm), but are also tempered to take account of the practicalities of the research contexts, that is the teaching and learning situations, and the needs and interests of clients and stakeholders. Three of the projects discussed here were designed to meet the specifications of the commissioning agencies as well as the needs of the practitioners in the institutions, while two were less constrained and intended purely to enhance understanding of learning in the particular education community. In peer reviews of research, the highest rated projects tend to be those that are sponsored by independent funding agencies. In my funded research, therefore, *Learning from Coursework* and *Independent Learning in the Middle Years* would likely have the highest approbation.

Nonetheless, the need for a more flexible process has been both called for (Scott & Oulton, 1999) and observed (Stronach & Torrance, 1995; Harland, 1996), while research text books such as Miles and Huberman (1984:20) appear to have little problem with their statement that, *it is getting harder to find any methodologists solidly encamped in one epistemology or the other.* The debate has been revived by Carr (2000) who acknowledges, and even celebrates the intertwining of theoretical and methodological perspectives and argues that educational researchers inevitably select approaches that mirror their personal values and beliefs.

Hence, there has been a move from a discrete, but esoteric, specialist activity to an eclectic choice of models and approaches (see Harland, 1996) and both evaluation and research are nowadays often carried out with great effect by non-experts. Educational research has been increasingly promoted as a classroom activity for all teachers wishing to improve their own or colleagues' practice (Stenhouse, 1975, Hopkins, 1993; DfEE, 1998). Similarly, in this present time of accountability in education, evaluation of activities and curricula has become a requirement for most professionals rather than an option for academics and consultants.

It follows, therefore, that the justification and argument for a particular approach to data gathering, showing how aims and objectives have been met and findings warranted, is even more vital for a credible study. The evaluation and research designs underpinning the papers presented here were constructed within the context of the teams' shared view of reality and what constitutes evidence for knowing (epistemology), and also after careful consideration of the stated aims and objectives of the studies, the characteristics and location of the participants from whom data was to be collected, the complexities of the realities being studied, and scrutiny of recent and classical methodologies.

The methodological principles considered were, first, the framework of the studies. While two were primarily evaluative, with particular requirements for the systematic gathering of evidence of quality for decision making and accountability, and three were ostensibly research studies, with requirements for trustworthy findings, the processes of gathering and interpreting good quality data were not really very different. In each case, a basic steer to the study arose from the clear research questions that were methodologically formulated and used to guide the data collecting methods. The whole range

of data collecting methods was considered and those most appropriate for the stated objectives selected.

Second, there was a principle that participants can have a differential view of the importance of aspects of an activity or event. In a reliable and valid study, different groups need to have their voices heard (for examples see MacBeath, *et al.*, 1996; Morgan & Morris, 1999; and see Saunders, 1998 for a critique of less participatory modes). It was also necessary to consider the physical availability, the level of commitment and likelihood for considered reflection amongst respondents, and to suit the data collecting methods to these variants.

Third, the principle relating to epistemology was that in a diverse and complex situation, it is almost impossible to link hard evidence about attitudes and learning to one single event or activity (Broadfoot, *et al.*, 1988). The brief for the evaluations was to provide evidence that personal tutoring and personal learning planning had improved particular behaviours in pupils (for similar studies see Watts, 1992; Everett & Pettigrew 1993; Watts 1994; Hughes 1996). That there were such behaviours and attitudes which could be observed, measured and compared in some form was not really in doubt. What was doubted by us as researchers, however, was the extent to which these measurements could be linked to specific events in a school or college. The most that any attitude scale could achieve was an indication of which intended outcomes from the activity were rated more positively by respondent groups. It would not illuminate the reasons for this. In this belief, we were sometimes at odds with funders who clung to their views in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence. At the outset of the *Personal Learning Plan* project, we were required to argue persuasively for the inclusion of qualitative as well as quantitative approaches in order to be able to investigate the social meaning of the data we had gathered.

The scientific approach was therefore tempered by my belief that these quantitative data could not provide the complete picture. Reflections on the pupils', teachers', parents' and providers' own experiences and beliefs were also explored and interpreted, as a complement to, rather than an alternative to, the attitude scales. Through such qualitative interpretations of the quantitative data, understanding of concerns, successes, weaknesses and differences in practice was improved and theories developed to support debate, change and policy making. Whether evaluation or research, the validity of the projects was enhanced through triangulation of the different approaches to identifying, gathering and using data (Zeller, 1997).

Data analysis was ongoing throughout the projects. This was true for both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of the research. Where appropriate, each aspect of the research was explicated and related to the other strands. This allowed constant checking of reliability or dependability and validity or trustworthiness (Hopkins, 1989; Sarantakos, 1993; Punch, 2005). Feedback to the funders, steering groups, participating schools, teachers and other professionals was regularly presented in the format most suitable for the audience.

In the next section, I turn to my own reflections on learning over the time of this research. I set out the collective ideas and compelling arguments I have encountered and used. I link my personal development to the background reading that has influenced me, and to many perceptive comments from interviewees.

5. CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENTS

For the past years, the focus of my research has been learning. Learning is a broad topic that has been addressed through the theoretical frameworks of psychology, sociology and pedagogy. What I mean by learning crosses these disciplinary boundaries and is set out the publications, in most detail in Bullock & Wikeley, (2004, chapter 5). In particular, I have explored strategies for promoting learning and investigated how pupils, students and adults perceive and make meaning from their own learning. More recently, I have focused on personal learning and the impact of one-to-one educational relationships, mediating tools and social contexts on learning experiences. My publications were originally conceived as a means of disseminating noteworthy practice and worthwhile developments from learning initiatives and classroom practices to teachers, tutors, concerned agencies and the educational community in general. None was written with the intention of submission for a doctoral thesis. Nonetheless they contribute to a coherent programme of research in that they focus on, and clarify, the nature, impact and value of an interpersonal interaction in terms of student learning. Commonalities and contrasts in the nature of the experiences and the influences on learning are now developed in linking these papers together for this thesis.

Using Theory

A theory is an explanation of a set of observations or happenings in terms of a system of inter-related concepts or ideas (Poulson & Wallace, 2004). The

research studies assembled here have each demanded theorisation in both the substantive and methodological domains. The necessity of framing explanations to convince others of the integrity of the research approaches and findings has enriched and developed my own conceptualisations of the nature of, and interpersonal influences on, learning. However, my approach to research has never rested on one particular theoretical mindset. Rather, my interest has been fostered by observations and personal reflections on how things happen, and the ways in which people act to make them happen, in particular contexts. For me, theory is then used to corroborate and enhance meaning and understanding of these events, and is revisited and extended at the stage of interpretation and analysis in order to consolidate or amend current thinking and critical comment.

All research begins from the beliefs, knowledge and conceptualisations of the researcher. In turn, this is influenced by the *zeitgeist* or prevailing theories and arguments of the time. A description of my own theoretical development is, therefore, one representation of the literature and voice of the educational research community to which I belong. It is only one representation. The range and depth of writing on learning means most researchers in the field have to limit their reading to theories that have greatest resonance for them. In order to comment on my professional and academic growth over the span of these research projects, I have set out the ideas that have most influenced me. To start, I need to recapture and reflect on the point where I began.

Learning as Cognitive Development

The earliest research studies presented in this thesis reflect a view of learning that, primarily, was influenced by a belief (no doubt wrought from the experience of initial teacher education in the 1960s) that learning is active, developmental and individual. This could be linked to a Piagetian

perspective. Piaget (1971) famously set out his view on the stages of growth and intellectual development of children as being systematic and sequential with each subsequent level of cognitive development dependent on a symbiosis between youngsters' physical and mental interaction with the world around them and the biological maturation of their nervous system. Thus, readiness to learn was indicated by the child's activities and their maturity in making sense of new experiences. Piaget put the child at the source of his or her own learning with the teacher merely acting as a provider of experiences and a guide to the reasoning process. He identified three main stages of development (sensorimotor, concrete operational and formal operational) and specified the age limits within which the stages would occur.

The reasoning that initially framed the style and conduct of my research, therefore, assumed that, in order to develop cognitively, the learner must interact, in some way, with the learning materials or task, but that the same activities are not necessarily equally effective for all students. My research, therefore, was designed to explore and explicate the learning processes that engaged, or failed to engage, different groups of young people and to examine the learners' understanding of these. Findings stressed the centrality of the student in his or her own learning and highlighted students' need to know that proficiency in learning skills is not innate but has to be developed. This stance can be detected in the *Personal Learning Plans, Learning from Coursework* and *Post-16 Tutorial Provision* projects.

> *.....and we just talked to all our teachers we had and they told us how we were getting on, what we could do to improve on in our work and all that and then we had a talk to*[personal tutor] *and he just asked us if it was all right and asked what we needed to improve on, that sort of thing.* (NVQ student FE college)

However, the analysis of tasks and expectations arising from coursework, for example, also provided unique insights into the delicate balance between

teacher support and student autonomy in providing a framework for development. This has been discussed in Publications 2 and 3. Further, the findings from the action planning initiatives were welcomed by tutors for the level of insight they provided about their pupils' attitudes, experiences and difficulties in different learning situations. In the most propitious cases, such critical feedback allowed teachers more accuracy and confidence in providing the appropriate experiences relating to individual pupils' planning for learning (see Publication 6).

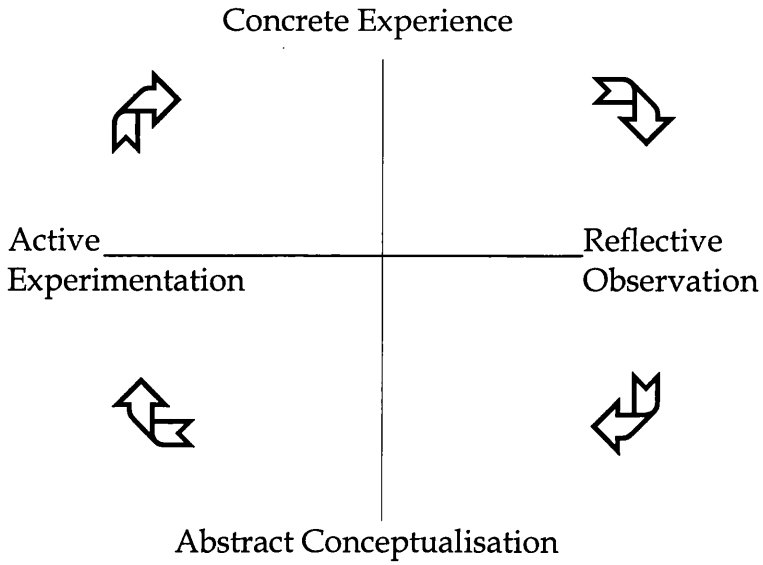
Theorisation of the early research was also predicated on the need for internalisation of the learning content. Learning, I observed, is not only active; it needs to be personalised in some way. According to Ausubel & Robinson (1969:50-51), the most important factor influencing meaningful learning is not the stage of development, but the quality, clarity and organisation of the learner's present knowledge. New knowledge which cannot be adapted into the framework of the individual cognitive structure, they contend, is 'rote' and, as the human mind is not designed to store arbitrary information without clear connections, is thus less effective and retainable. The activity of the learner in transforming new material into an appropriate form to augment, extend or change pre-existing knowledge is the crucial step in learning.

The activity of learning has also been explained (Piaget, 1971) as the twin cognitive functions of assimilating new information and accommodating this within pre-existing structures of knowledge. In my personal theorisations of learning, I have been persuaded by the arguments (Kolb, 1984; Riding & Raynor, 1998; Sfard, 1998) that learning requires both acquisition of skills or knowledge, and internalisation of these into individual learner identities. Some researchers have viewed these two essential steps of learning - acquisition and internalisation - as distinct continuums of practice, with a

learner's preferred approach to learning distributed between two diametrical ways of gaining and using information or skills. Riding and Raynor (1998), for example, identify the dimensions as Wholist-Analytic and Verbal-Imagery styles. By this they mean that when presented with a piece of information some learners have a preference for grasping it as a whole concept, while others favour an atomistic, step-by-step approach. At the stage of internalisation, some will use words to accommodate the new knowledge into their existing understanding while others prefer images or pictures.

One of the most documented, and adapted, models of learning is that of Kolb (1984). For long, this appealed to my notion of active learning, such as that explored in the *Learning from Coursework* project. Kolb suggested that effective learning results from a cycle of: experience, reflection, conceptualisation and testing those concepts in new situations. The acquisition of new knowledge or skills is a process which needs to encompass all segments from this cycle, but where the cycle begins depends on the learning context. Kolb saw experience and conceptualisation as the polar extremes of the acquisition stage of learning and argued that we gather knowledge either by living the experience or by being told about it. Internalisation of knowledge is achieved either through reflection or active testing. Kolb believed that few people have equal innate skill in all four areas and, hence, individuals develop an orientation towards one of the poles in each dimension. This he called their preferred learning styles. The Kolb model is set out in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Kolb's Learning Cycle



Styles of Learning

There have been efforts to categorise learners into preferred learning types, and to link these particular styles of learning such as that which balances experiencing and conceptualising, with the quality of learning outcomes in different contexts (see Heffler, 2001; Mainemelis *et al.*, 2002). On the other hand, many educators question the trustworthiness of learning style categorisations (Duffy & Duffy, 2002; Henson & Hwang, 2002; Swailes & Senior, 1999; Garner, 2000) and challenge the belief that learning styles should be matched by curricular or pedagogic modifications (Klein, 2003). Klein points out that learning styles are usually assessed through a range of perceptions and skills, including cognitive style which concerns central processes such as reasoning and memory. Most students indicate mixed and inconsistent preferences depending on the task and Klein argues that almost all learning activities require different quantities of a variety of skills. Swailes & Senior (1999) observe that analyses of learning style profiles in academic settings reveal a dominance of the Reflector/Theorist traits. Their findings do not support the four categories of learning style and they observe a more

generic structure of learning, indicative of a three-stage cycle of Action, Reflection and Planning.

Perhaps influenced by recent reports such as that by Coffield *et al.* (2004), I now question the basic assumptions underpinning the theory of learning styles and note the comment from Säljö (1998) that the internal, mental activity of the learner is only one ingredient of learning. Meadows' explanation (2004) of the processes of assimilation and accommodation as an active reiteration rather than a set predisposition seems more convincing. In Meadows' view, the active reiteration gives rise to rules, categories and procedures that individuals use to organise their future learning. For me, these personal conceptual shifts were partially triggered by findings from the *Learning from Coursework* project. I was taken, for example, by the way some students talked about their learning.

> *You need to be critical of yourself and read it through and be able to see where you need to improve and you need to point out bits where you need to change it. It is about judging for yourself.* (16 year-old girl)

And also by the tensions that were articulated by students, parents and teachers in the critical balance between teacher guidance (assimilation) and independent decision making and problem solving (accommodation).

The Constructivist View

The belief in learning as a constructivist and active process is supported by the work of Jerome Bruner (1971). He also defined learning as the formation of concepts and the organisation of these concepts into mental models that build on what has been learned before. Bruner, however, argued that concepts are neither independent nor discrete, but dynamic changing ideas. Autonomous learning only genuinely results from the effort (or activity) of discovering and adapting concepts. In his view, it is practice and confidence

in working with heuristics by constantly moving from concrete actions to abstract ideas that enables pupils, of any age, to develop inquiring minds (Bruner, 1971:122). As a constructivist, Bruner advocated a spiral curriculum with ideas being revisited at different levels. He conceptualised the lowest level of concrete actions as 'Enactive' representations of learning. He then believed students could move to 'Iconic' representation and finally to, 'Symbolic' representation at the top of the spiral.

In his arguments Bruner took a different tack to some of the more behaviourist writers of the time such as Bloom (1956) and Gagné (1975). Although both of these psychologists saw knowledge as incremental; they conceptualised it in more atomistic terms. Both constructed taxonomies of knowledge and learning behaviours. As Eisner (2000) points out, the distinctiveness of a taxonomy lies in its hierarchical classification. Each level of intellectual activity, therefore, is dependent on the one(s) below and is a pre-requisite for the one(s) above. In order to function at the highest level of Bloom's cognitive taxonomy - evaluation - a learner would need to have necessary knowledge, be able to understand and apply it and be capable of analysis and synthesis in using it. Bloom saw his taxonomy as a framework for assessment and evaluation, but also as a practical tool for developing higher mental processes and the sequencing of instruction (Eisner, 2000).

The idea of specific behavioural statements of objectives for teaching and learning is appealing to those with a developmental conviction. A confounding argument here is that the educational process is not always linear and, as observed earlier, never the same for all students. This was clearly demonstrated by the following comments from respondents' comments in my research into *Supporting Effective Learning* and *Independent Learning in the Middle Years* (see Publications 8 and 9). For example, the

following quotations are from 11 year-old pupils about to make the transition to secondary school.

> *I think everyone can learn as well as everyone else, but I just think that some people learn better at other subjects than others because they like it better than others.* (11 year-old boy)

> *The most effort they put in probably to their work. There are some people that chat and they just don't do much work and they leave it to the last ten minutes of the lesson to try and do all their work. There are other people who just work all the way through the lesson and little by little they get it done really.* (11 year-old girl)

Buxkemper & Hartfiel (2003) point out that in mathematics, analysis and synthesis are frequently carried out simultaneously and, together with evaluation, are often needed for application. Further, Morgan & Saxton (1991:9) have observed that *a structure that dictates process inhibits the natural action of enquiry.*

The Desire to Learn

My research into *Learning from Coursework* supported this argument. The coursework component of the GCSE was originally claimed (Schools Examination Council, 1985) to give students autonomy and scope in their learning strategies and styles. The nature and extent of this was explored through in-depth pupil, parent and teacher interviews during the research. In this study, students claimed that they learned 'well' through coursework because the chosen project was ultimately their responsibility (see also Morgan & Morris, 1999).

The exploration of *Learning from Coursework* also highlighted the impact of mediating tools in learning and the interleaving of coursework with assessment could not be ignored. The formative aspect of assessment was more apparent in coursework than in other classroom learning activities and teachers', peers' and parents' feedback on draft work was valued. While this

was acknowledged in students' better understanding of how they could improve their own work, formative assessment was still a weaker incentive for students to do well than potential grades. Black & Wiliam (1998) have commented that the value of assessment as a learning tool is often not made explicit in schools. This is despite a legacy of writings on models of learning, in which seminal thinkers have emphasised the notion of active learning, the benefits of practising the activity, and the formative influence of assessment feedback.

Coursework allowed students to construct their own learning *modus operandi*, agenda, pace and timetables, and this challenge sometimes appeared to promote a relevance which was not apparent in other areas of the curriculum. Although they had not heard the terms, many clearly understood that this engagement in their own learning encouraged deep or meaningful learning.

The theory that learners can take either a deep approach or a surface approach depending on their motivation or level of interest in the subject was originally developed from empirical research by Marton and Säljö (1976; 1984). It has since been expanded by many others including Entwistle (1981). Deep learning is viewed as preferable as it involves an understanding and engagement with the subject matter rather than a purely instrumental approach. The predictor of deep or surface learning lies with the motivation to be involved in the learning experience. Motivation will vary with individuals, their self confidence in the field and their level of expertise and, my research suggests, the educational relationships that work to support the learning. The following comments were made by pupil respondents in *Independent Learning in the Middle Years* and *Personal Learning Plans.*

> *I think it's all to do with confidence really. If they're confident with their work. Others aren't so confident.* (11 year-old boy)

> *You can have help to understand yourself with the aid of your teacher.* (14 year-old girl)

Entwistle's development of this work (Entwistle and Smith, 2002) creates a more intricate model of learning that takes heed of a distinction between *target understanding* of the subject content interpreted by the teacher and the *personal understanding* that is obtained by the learner. The remit of the teacher or tutor is to work with students to close the gap between target and personal understanding.

Learning as a Social Interaction

Lunzer's (1989) early criticism of the theories of Piaget rested on the accelerating impact of mediation and feedback on both learning and attitude. Other writers (Heylings & Tariq, 2001) confirm that the provision of feedback on performance is essential to extend and consolidate the necessary learning skills. This point was stressed in all the projects in this thesis, but it is not a simple matter. How feedback is sought, given and used determines effectiveness (see Publication 7.) Improvement derives from reasoned judgements of previous performance. Feedback on these will instigate reflection and explanations and develop clear goals. But to be effective, feedback must be timely and challenging and knowing how to make it so will depend on the educational relationship between the teacher and learner.

My research (see Publication 7) has suggested that a key way of assimilating new knowledge was to talk about it with peers or someone with a more developed understanding. The active part of learning, therefore, can become discussion or talk. The studies into tutorial provision highlighted the benefits for learners of taking part in a one-to-one conversation with their tutor or another adult. In the most successful cases, this dialogue helped students to understand the diverse and continuous nature of human understanding and

to identify specific activities which would enable them to learn. As one articulate pupil in the *Personal Learning Plans* project explained:

> *It* [talking to the tutor] *gets you thinking about the type of person you are. What your skills and abilities are, what you want to be and what you can do about it.* (14 year-old girl)

It has long been acknowledged that good communications about work motivates learners (Harris & Bell, 1986). Bruner contributed to the debate with his thoughts

> *....., one of the most crucial ways in which a culture provides aid in intellectual growth is through a dialogue between the more experienced and less experienced, providing a means for the internalization of dialogue in thought. The courtesy of dialogue may be the major ingredient in the courtesy of teaching.*
> Bruner (1971:107)

In their research into the benefits of pupil talk, Rudduck *et al.* (1996:168-175) stated that relationships at school are an important influence affecting pupils' attitudes to their learning. Rudduck noted that it was apparent that pupils valued the teacher-pupil relationship particularly when teachers were available to talk to pupils about learning and schoolwork. Claxton (1990) extended this and identified talk as an important strategy for learning in other contexts.

> *If you can talk to your teachers, or your Mum and Dad or, most importantly, your friends about school work you may be in a more powerful position than those who cannot.*
> (Claxton, 1990:107)

The *Personal Learning Plans* project stressed that the benefits of such talk are that it is, at least partly, in the control of the pupil. Most classroom discourse is at the invitation of the teacher (see Norman, 1992) and conducted in an open (whole class) forum. Personal development (or learning) planning

activities put pupils in a different relationship with their tutors, and remove the distraction or influence of the peer group. My research (see Publication 6) identified three strands to this strategy of dialogue with an informed adult:

1. exercising the ability to articulate what is known in order to meet the requirements of tests and examinations such as the GCSE;
2. interacting at a social level with a concerned adult who is not a close associate or family member;
3. developing an understanding (for both student and tutor) of how the pupil, as an individual, learns best.

For some pupils, such a dialogue was the first individual guidance they had received about how they might set about the process of learning. For others, the focused conversation was the spur for more in-depth reflection. Through this social interaction they acquired and used concepts, language and understanding that promoted more sophisticated mental activity. If talk is to be a successful tool for learning it needs to be well structured and focused on the three components above without diminishing or inhibiting the element of student control. This is neither a simple nor necessarily a natural task for teachers and tutors who may be used to a more directive role.

Interpersonal Relationships in Learning

In the *Learning from Coursework* study, students and their parents stressed the need for a balance between teacher support and confident independent activity by the student. A limitation in my earlier theorising about learning was that it gave too little recognition to interpersonal relationships in the processes of transformation of knowledge and the balance of responsibility for learning. My first conceptualisation of learning as active, developmental and individual, therefore, required adjustment. This insight gradually evolved throughout the process of bringing together and reflecting on my research findings and conceptualisations about learning for the book *Whose*

Learning? (Publication 7). They were not fully articulated until the conclusions and final chapter of the book were being drafted in Autumn 2003.

The research into *Independent Learning in the Middle Years* was derived from a more complex consideration of the role of interpersonal relationships in learning. This study focussed on pupils' first efforts at self-monitoring as they attempted to 'talk themselves through' an activity. We used pupils' abilities to organise and check their own learning as an indicator of a step vital in helping the child move from being supported by the teacher to performing an activity unaided. Bruner (1986) identified this move as a point of 'handover' from the teacher to the child. The concept of hand-over, however, also highlights the complexity of the concept of independence. The essential activity of working alone is only a small part in a sequence of activities where the responsibility for the learning process moves back and forth from teacher to pupil. Tharp and Gallimore (1991) show how this sequence can be viewed as part of a cycle where hand-over takes the child from dependency on the teacher to a stage of self-monitoring within what Vygotsky termed the zone of proximal development:

> *Indeed, by asking questions and adopting other sub-routines of the adult's assistance, children gradually take over the actual structuring of the task and thereby acquire not only the performance but also the process of transfer of performance.*
> Tharp and Gallimore, 1991:51)

In this research we observed that peers and others frequently acted along side, or in place of, the teacher as the support for learning. Publication 9, *Learning About Learning in the Primary School,* analyses the ways in which pupils in Year 6 described themselves as learners. For example:

> *I ask the person sitting next to me,... we have groups depending on how good you are at learning, how good you are at Maths and that, Yes, I tend to ask the person next to me.* (11 year-old boy)

> *You have a literacy partner and a numeracy partner, so you work with some of them some of the time, and then sometimes you get in a group of four or five or something and then work it out together.....*(11 year-old girl)

The publication explores pupils' perceptions of support and challenge and provides insights into the reality of individual and co-constructivist learning (Carnell & Lodge, 2002) in the primary school.

Similarly, in *Supporting Effective Learning* we examined teachers' explanations about the limitations that they wished to address through small action research activities to enhance pupil learning. This, we argued, would reveal much about teachers' views of learning, and provide an insight into their own and their pupils' learning. Interviews with these practitioners further reinforced my premises about the power of interpersonal relationships in guiding learning (see Publication 8). An example is this explanation of a teaching strategy from a secondary teacher.

> ..... *by looking at somebody else's work and trying to evaluate their work and identify... I didn't want to call them 'weaknesses', but to identify problem areas and things they were good at, that by setting a partner learning targets, they would hopefully, in time, have someone set them for them, but in return they would actually be able to do it for themselves.* (Language teacher, secondary school)

Thus, my theorisation about the nature of talk between the learner and teacher returned to the influence of a 'more capable other'. This model has been well explicated by Vygotsky (1978) who emphasised the responsibility of other individuals in sharing culture and consciousness with learners. In this way the existing knowledge and capabilities of learners are enhanced and extended so that in time learners become able to perform at a level they would not have been able to without interaction with another individual or group. Vygotsky called this extending the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) while Bruner (1986) used the term 'scaffolding' to describe the

structured guidance which more informed individuals give to learners to encourage them to develop new skills, attitudes or understanding. Some commentators on coursework (see Publication 2) referred to 'frameworks' for enabling a student to use such extended tasks in order to develop higher learning skills such as creativity and critical thinking. A key to the successful embedding of these high-level skills may be the timely and properly structured removal of the framework. One teacher described how she provided a framework and then encouraged students to move beyond it.

> *I always like to set the question 'If you had unlimited time and resources how would you do things differently?' and I think a lot of very interesting ideas come out there and they can reflect upon problems they may have had in the field and think carefully how could those problems have been solved.* (Geography Teacher, secondary school)

The 'more capable other' model is accorded a central focus in my later research and analysis which rests on a socio-constructivist view of learning. This theory has defined an optimum learning environment as an interaction between a learner and a 'more capable other' (Vygotsky, 1978). The 'more capable other' frames and guides appropriate knowledge and development paths for the learner(s). The research studies, *Supporting Effective Learning* and *Independent Learning in the Middle Years,* assume pupils' need for support and good quality relationships with an informed adult (see McBeath *et al.*, 1996). I now argue that this relationship is important in <u>all</u> learning and my recent small study sponsored by the British Academy, *The Impact of Educational Relationships on the Learning and Retention of Access Students* sought to examine access students' understanding of their own processes of learning and the relationships that support their related academic and emotional needs. This research has recently been completed and papers to disseminate findings that focus on issues such as the *Support Networks used by Access Students* and *Access Students' Perceptions of Educational Relationships* are planned.

The theoretical framework underpinning my earlier research, therefore, was based on the idea that learning is derived from the psychological makeup and experiences of the individual. The related papers stress the centrality of the pupil in his or her own learning, discuss the nature of the interaction between learner and teacher, and highlight pupils' needs to know that proficiency in learning skills is not innate but has to be developed. Resulting arguments suggest some straightforward observations as fundamental, but sometimes under-emphasised, truths about learning that could be more fully addressed by secondary schools. These include:

- there are three strands to learning: knowing what to learn; knowing how to learn and knowing yourself;
- there is a gap between students' desires to do well and their understanding of how to learn;
- students are not necessarily aware that learning is a social activity and that talking about the nature and processes of learning is beneficial for learning.

The emerging message is that the ability to learn is dependent on a range of information gathering and processing skills, such as collecting and organising data and identifying and reforming concepts. The most beneficial skills depend on individual characteristics and previous experiences. Once the skill is recognised as a mechanism for learning, it can be refined and practised (Cooper & McIntyre, 1996). Social interaction is required in selecting and refining the appropriate skills.

Increasingly theorisation from my research points to the strong mediating influence of educational relationships and group cultures in the processes of capturing and transforming knowledge. I now argue that learning is fashioned not only by individual characteristics and preferred practices but

also by the various contexts of social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Dreier, 1999) that the learner has experienced. Beyond this, I would stress that, in enabling learning, a one-to-one educational relationship is an effective form of social interaction. These points move my conceptualisation of effective learning processes as an outcome of individual characteristics to a phenomenon that is also enmeshed in social and cultural contexts. It is these ideas that I wish to explore in future work. I have used Section 6 to establish my present beliefs about the nature of learning and to explore current issues and practice that influence my thinking.

6. LEARNING AS AN EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIP

New Dimensions

As educational researchers we are driven by the belief that much knowledge and understanding about education remains to captured and articulated. By such means, we reason, we can shape the policies and approaches that will help all individuals to become better learners. The elucidation of these has been the major thrust for educational philosophers, psychologists and practitioners. However, in this wide and amorphous field, common vocabulary, key issues and shared understanding relating to the nature and processes of learning remains sparse. Notwithstanding arguments that learning is complex, social and active (Joyce, *et al.*, 2002; James & Gipps, 1998; Krechevsky & Seidal, 2001; Carnell & Lodge, 2002; Renshaw, 2003; Bullock & Wikeley, 2004), recent research skirts the reality of learning in terms of when it does and does not happen, and how people allow or enable themselves to engage with it.

It could be argued that this is, *inter alia*, because of the historically dominant (but restricted) theoretical perspectives employed in the scrutiny. In the main, learning has been investigated either from the conception of learning as *transmission*, or alternatively, that of learning as *acquisition*. The first stance explores the perspective of the teacher (pedagogical strategies) (see Collins & Cook, 2001; Leat & Higgins, 2002), or the nature of the content (disciplinary knowledge) (see Bishop & Denley, 1997; Mercer, 2000). The second approach considers the innate predispositions of the learner (learning styles) (see Marton & Säljö, 1984; Riding & Raynor, 1998; Sadler-Smith, 2001; Klein. 2003), and the psychological processes (theories of learning) (see Wood, 1998).

Research that categorises predispositions, models and contexts for transferring knowledge, skills or understanding (e.g. Goleman, 1997; Riding, and Rayner, 1998; Sternberg, 1989) has become the prevailing orthodoxy in many schools and colleges. Classroom practitioners are currently absorbed by strategies for accelerated learning and notions of styles of learning (a popular source is Smith, 1998) that must be matched by appropriate teaching strategies. In this, they cannot be blamed. Such theories offer a logical explanation for individual differences in learning outcomes and persuasive excuses for failure to cope with learning. Further, they hint at practical remedies by matching teaching activities to learning styles. Coffield, *et al.*, (2004), and others, however, argue that the promise is false and that the model merely serves as a distraction for teachers.

A third perspective in the exploration of learning - learning as *relationships* has largely remained within the theoretical, rather than the practical, domain. However, studies on the interactional and cultural factors underpinning learning have been growing in number and conviction. These stress the impact of the relationship between the learner and a 'more capable other', and the power inherent in this relationship to engage and guide the learner. For example, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of *communities of learning* is founded on social relationships and situations of co-participation, while Rogoff *et al.* (2003) emphasise the interpersonal dynamics between the learners and the individuals who support their learning. They go on to explore the nature of the opportunities that communities present for learning. As they see it, learning is fashioned, not only from individual characteristics and preferred practices, but also by the various contexts of social practice that the learner has experienced (Lave & Wenger, 1998; Dreier, 1999). This premise is now beginning to be considered in the UK in terms of school organisation and educational practice.

> *Children and families should be seen as part of the larger productive system that creates learning. Learning depends on creative interaction.*
> (Leadbeater, 2005:5)

Persuaders and Dissuaders

One aim of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme was 'to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK' (www.tlrp.org) and projects focus on social environments, and networks as well as more formal classroom settings. However, few focus on the working nature of the relationships that may be the key influence for learning.

A recent volume of the British Educational Research Journal (31 (5) October 2005) is devoted to educational policy and social justice. While the contributors cross sectors and phases of education, all argue that educational policy must work towards ensuring equal opportunities for learning and learners. The importance of educational relationships in nurturing learning experiences for all is consistently identified. For example, in their work on childcare provision for the under fives, Ball & Vincent (2005) regret a lack of concern for the social relations that are sought by parents for their children. Harris & Ransom (2005) point to the contradiction between government policy and practice in addressing the personalisation of learning for young people. Smaller teaching groups and more investment in learning support are urged by Lupton (2005:603) who also stresses the need for an *understanding of the critical importance of what goes on outside the school for the quality of education that is delivered within.* In all this, however, there is only superficial recognition of the educational relationships that can provide an impetus and a model for learning. The relationships themselves and what makes them effective (or not) are not examined.

Other influential work is that derived from social and cultural activity theory and related to learning in communities and organisations. Examples have recently been discussed by researchers such as Edwards (2005) and Engeström (2005). In her national evaluation of the Children's Fund, Edwards explores ways in which different service providers worked with the same children and families over time and established learning relationships between the stakeholders. Engeström moves learning out of the classroom and examines it in multiple locations. He uses the term 'co-configuration' or learning in 'knotworks' and sees learning as germinating from negotiation between different parties in order to find common language and references. Learning he believes is transformative. It is to do with experiencing and identity construction. In my on-going research study, *Educational Relationships and their Impact on Poverty,* a 13 year old girl described her learning experiences with adults out of school as follows:

> Girl *Well they were a lot different because I knew the adults at youth group a lot better because I talked to them a lot more. Because you really don't talk to them* [teachers] *really, you know about any problems that you might have, obviously.....You talk to them about school work basically, unless you personally know each other. But it was much easier to talk to somebody at church or somebody at youth group than your teacher....*
>
> KB *So what do you think that you learnt from the youth group?*
>
> Girl *Mmm, well you learn a lot of like values and things...*
> (13 year-old girl)

However, despite evidence that suggests learning is not confined to the social context of the school and educational relationships are not limited to formal educational settings (Leadbeater, 2005), current comment places much responsibility for the failure to learn in the formal education system. *For too long, too many children have been failed by poorly-performing schools* (BBC, 2000 online). Although less easy to recognise in the wider world which contains many learning contexts (home, school, college, workplace, leisure and sports

clubs and the like) with a variety of teachers both real and virtual (Renshaw 2003), in reality, learning that takes place outside formal settings has, at least, as much influence as formal schooling over the experiences, beliefs and values that shape and confirm the learning practices of both learners and their teachers. Learning theorists such as Tharp & Gallimore (1998:93) argue that schools have much to learn from formal and informal pedagogies in other communities; while Carr & Claxton (2004) observe that Bourdieu & Passeron's (1990) notion of dispositions for learning are nurtured in a variety of interactions in local social contexts and are acted and extended throughout a life course. In each situation, individuals (who can be both teachers and learners) draw on the culture of the group to develop personal stances within that particular social context and decide the extent and quality of their participation.

Society is based on social relationships. It is these relationships that shape our values, influence our choices and mould our experiences. As they develop, children embrace different social groups. The first they encounter are 'at home'. They are then exposed to a number of different educational relationships 'in school', and subsequently may come across several that might be labelled 'recreational'. How young people act and interact in these social and educational groups will have a profound impact on their activities and attitudes related to learning. This is illustrated in the quotation above. Despite this, most traditional studies of learning assume that the primary motivation for engagement is related to subject matter. There is little research into learning that takes the pleasure of the social relationship as the impetus.

For some years, schools and colleges have been constrained by government policies to demonstrate the achievement of learning, at all ages, through examination results. Arguments that educational relationships are at the heart of learning challenge government thinking that education, and

particularly schooling, should be all outcomes based. Learning how to develop and sustain relationships, how to work with others, how to make use of, and build on, other's expertise is equally, if not more, important than examination results in improving life chances. Cross-disciplinary connections are vital in developing transferable skills and in understanding their exchangeability across contexts. Further, these are the skills much demanded by employers (MacBeath, 2000). In our recently awarded bid for research funding (Wikeley, *et al.*, 2005), we have argued that this learning is developed over a long period of time through the relationships that children and young people have with adults in a variety of contexts, in and out of school. We suggest that those children with a greater number of educational relationships with adults in and out of school stand a better chance of success in terms of on-going learning and rewarding employment.

My Present Position

My conceptualisation of learning now asserts that learning is active and individual, but that these are mediated through social engagement. Social interactions, in turn, are dependent on a specific environment affected by culture, the perceptions and past experiences of learner(s) and teacher(s), and the interaction that takes place between them. It is the interactions, both implicit and explicit, between learners and those who support their learning that form the basis of the educational relationship. Educational relationships are founded on communication (Flutter & Rudduck, 2003). They tend to be hierarchical in nature (Edwards, 2002) and are fashioned by community and institutional cultures (Stoll, 2003; Osborn *et al.*, 2003).

The educational relationship is at the hub of personal learning and development. Entwistle & Smith (2002) indicate that students' existing knowledge and personal histories mediate their perceptions of task and engagement with learning. They suggest that discussion between learners

and teachers allows a shared understanding of preferred processes and desired outcomes to develop. Tharp and Gallimore (1998) argue that as the learner grasps and makes sense of the new knowledge or skill, the responsibility for the learning process moves back and forth from teacher to pupil. Within communities of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1998), the teacher is portrayed as a reflective mentor (Schön, 1987). This carries the assumption that in an educational relationship, the teacher should be seen, not as the 'knower', but as a fellow learner.

I (Wikeley & Bullock, in press) define an educational relationship as one where there is intention, from at least one side of the relationship (either 'teacher' or 'learner'), for learning to occur. However, this does not imply that a particular kind of specific activity is required (for example, didactic instruction), only that the intention exists for change - that is the learner gains a new skill, new attitude, or absorbs new knowledge or understanding. Educational relationships are constructed as sharing three dimensions:

- the mechanical or substantive activities that form the learning experience;
- the affective or social relationship that is formed between the learner and the 'more capable other' (see Bullock & Wikeley, 2004); and
- a conative component that reflects the personal attributes, preferences and intentions of the learner in relation to the outcomes of the learning. (These include prior knowledge, skills of metacognition, self efficacy and motivation and are similar to Carr & Claxton's (2004) dispositions for learning).

In turn these three dimensions are set within particular environments that are unique for each situation. Although every educational relationship is fashioned by, for example, preferred pedagogical methods and disciplinary knowledge, learning strategies and styles, and emotional drivers, it is not limited to techniques of delivery or rational steps comprising a knowable

sequence. Rather, it is infused with dynamic rings of invisible social contexts that surround each teacher-learner interaction. For example, these could include the influence of peer groups and colleagues, the ethos of the school or institution and the values of the home and community. All dimensions of educational relationships are further mediated by:

- the perceived power distance between the learner and the teacher;
- the understanding of rules and roles within the relationship;
- disciplinarity or the demands of the particular subject. These include the selected subject content, curriculum focus and assessment tasks which may influence the development and sustainability of the educational relationship.

However, interaction between a 'learner' and a 'teacher' does not automatically mean that learning is occurring. The more learning is probed, the more complex it becomes. Learning is neither simple nor straightforward. My concern is that the current focus on ways of transferring knowledge detracts from the power and characteristics of the relationship itself.

Future research that I am planning focuses on the nature of the interaction between 'teacher' and 'learner' (the form of the relationship) in order to determine how it influences the success or otherwise of intended learning. The research questions that I am currently pursuing include:

- What is the nature of the interaction that takes place within an educational relationship?
- What are the observed dynamics that make educational relationships complex to manage?
- What are the observed and perceived situational and personal constraints on participants within educational relationships?
- What is the nature of the shared knowledge and how is it developed?

- What can participants within educational relationships tell us about the dilemmas they face and the decisions they constantly have make to ensure that such a relationship thrives?

In order to better understand learning, it is necessary to identify and analyse the relationships that are the key element in its genesis. Indeed, perhaps a fundamental problem with learning theory so far, and its accompanying 'models' approach, is that not enough time has been taken to adequately acknowledge and empirically explore the complex nature of the interaction that leads to learning before developing generalist explanations of, and recommendations for, 'good practice' (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004).

7. CONTRIBUTION OF MY WORK TO THE PRACTICE OF LEARNING

In this section, I aim to demonstrate the impact of my work within the wider educational community. In particular, I consider how it resonates with current policy and informs practice.

The benefits of educational research for practitioners in the classroom are not always clear-cut (Everton *et al.*, 2000; Saunders, 2004). In the complex realities of the individual classroom, abstract generalisations about cognitive development and sociocultural influences may lack immediacy. However, I see my work as distinctive in contributing as much to a practice of learning as to a theory of learning. It has focussed on the particular context where teachers engage in one-to-one educational relationships with students. In my reflections on my own research and its place among the theories of learning that bridge psychology and sociology of education, I argue that I can offer an original, conceptual twist within a field that is already fully and critically analysed.

In all cases, my research projects have been grounded in learning environments. They have involved the participants in the learning process, both in the generation of the key research questions and as the informants that answer the questions. My research has, among other things, investigated strategies for school and college improvement, teachers' beliefs and practices, and the actions and reactions of students that lead to learning. Primarily, I have sought knowledge for understanding (Poulson & Wallace, 2004). This

has been used and analysed to provide a distinctive and more informed view of the complexities of the practice of learning that can be used both for individual professional development and institutional enrichment. In this way, my writing and, in particular, the book *Whose Learning?* has appealed to a range of teachers, tutors and mentors. Versions of the papers relating to personal learning planning, tutorial provision and the Beacon School Network have been fed back to middle managers and practitioners who have used them to enhance their classroom practice. Research findings have also been offered to senior managers with an overall remit to enhance institutional organisation. Thus, my work has provided research evidence to inform classroom practice.

Further, my work informs the current government policy to individualise learning. The early National Curriculum acknowledged the individual learner through a focus on Personal, Social and Health Education which contributed to a 'broad and balanced curriculum for every child' (DfEE/QCA 2000). In more recent years this balance has been upset by a greater emphasis on the teaching of skills that are more measurable, particularly those of literacy and numeracy. However, in its most recent policy document (DfES, 2005b), the government acknowledges the benefits for learning of small group tuition and the gains in confidence and motivation that accrue from personal mentoring and individual learning targets.

> *Our aim is to transform our school system so that every child receives an excellent education whatever their background and wherever they live..... To make that happen we need an education system that is designed around the needs of the individual with education tailored to the needs of each child.*
> (DfES, 2005b:9)

My published work can also inform government policy on life long learning. The national strategy for 14-19 education is set out in the 2002 papers *Opportunity and Excellence* and *Success for All.* In response to this strategy, a

consortium of trainers and educators in the London region set out the Pan-London 14 - 19 Learner Offer. This document outlined plans to improve the skills and opportunities for progression for 14–19 year olds in London and to 'put London at the forefront of transforming education and training for young people'. Using findings from our current research as evidence, we (Bullock & Wikeley, 2005) set out a response to the DfES consultation on this initiative.

In our comments, we argued that the Pan-London Learner Offer would be strengthened by more explicit emphasis on the role of educational relationships in supporting on-going individual learning rather than limiting these to times of transition. In particular, we suggested that there should be more stress on the importance of a universal entitlement to a one-to-one educational relationship which transcends traditional subject boundaries and transition points. This response is set out in full at Appendix 3.

My research and writing can also contribute to current government drives to redress deep-rooted inequalities of class, race and gender through improved education for all. Here, the beliefs are that poverty and deprived social status are the major obstacles to positive life chances in the UK, but that education is the key to surmounting this as students who succeed in education and carry on learning after the age of 16 are more likely to contribute positively to society and escape from the poverty trap (Ennals, 2005).

The Government has sought to demonstrate improved standards of education through measurable outcomes such as examination results, inspection reports, target setting and the like. However, this hard evidence fails to disguise observations that social class is still likely to be the greatest determinant of educational achievement (Harris & Ranson, 2005) and that many children are still trapped in the cycle of deprivation, educational

underachievement and failure (Bradshaw, 2005). There has been little research that indicates what exactly can be done to help learners extract themselves from this seemingly relentless cycle but my most recent research project, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and conducted with Drs Wikeley, Muschamp and Ridge (Wikeley *et al.*, 2005) seeks to explore this issue. Our argument, building on Wenger (1998), is that individual identity is fashioned through a nexus of group multi-membership. Society is based on social relationships and the sense of self or personal identity that children construct develops from social and cultural activities (Holland *et al.*, 1998). Hence, children's views of themselves as learners will be moulded by their participation in activities with others and also by discourses that make explicit worthwhile practices from those experiences.

We, (Bullock & Wikeley, 2004) and others (e.g. Fuller and Unwin, 2004) have observed and acknowledged the importance of one-to-one relationships in creating contexts that 'switch people on' to developing their full potential. Further, we have observed differences in the ways particular groups of children conduct themselves within those relationships. In any situation, individuals (teachers and learners) both create and draw on the culture of the group to develop personal stances within a particular social context and to decide the extent and quality of their participation (Wenger, 1998). Children's interactions within these contexts are determined by socially constructed rules and expectations which guide behaviour and condition the ways in which they learn. Children's identities (Mead, 1934; Holland *et al.*, 1998) will necessarily be influenced by factors such as gender, class, race and economic circumstance. These factors are associated with particular cultural and material resources (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) and also create particular patterns of expectations that impinge on children's identities as learners. But it is children's ability to develop and sustain high quality educational relationships with adults, and their identity within those

relationships, that we would argue, is the key to their success within the formal school system.

This brings me to a reiteration of my current beliefs about learning.

1. Learning is active. Learners must engage with the content to be learned. They need to know that there are skills for learning which can be acquired and enhanced.
2. Learning is personal. Learners need to understand themselves, their strengths, weaknesses, their motivations and drivers.
3. But above all learning is social. The major conclusion from this body of work is that successful educational relationships are the foundations of effective learning. Learning how to develop and sustain relationships, how to work with others, to make use of, and build on other's expertise may be the key for young people to develop their identities as learners. Thus their life chances may be improved.

I would argue that my research, as demonstrated by the published works in this thesis, and as explored in this critique, draws attention to an original and developing conceptualisation of learning that is empirically derived from classrooms and practitioners. Its relevance will be to all those concerned with the practice of teaching and learning at every level.

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PART 2

PUBLICATION 1

Bullock, K. & Wikeley, F.

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IMPROVING LEARNING IN YEAR 9:
MAKING USE OF PERSONAL LEARNING PLANS

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Abstract

This paper takes an evaluative look at an action planning initiative which aimed to improve pupils' learning in Year 9. The cornerstone of the process was a one-to-one discussion between pupils and tutors which focused on their short and long term goals and identified targets for improvement. After the dialogue, a personal learning plan was written by the pupil. This was used to monitor development and to inform activities related to Records of Achievement in Year 10.

Findings suggested that, overall, this age group benefitted from action planning processes. Pupils gained through greater understanding of their own abilities and improved communication and planning skills. However, links between strategies for lifelong learning and the activities in Year 9 had not been made. There were different effects of the initiative for males and females.

Introduction

The term 'action planning' has now been well assimilated into the vocabulary of educationists. It has evolved from a variety of sources such as careers guidance (Watts, 1992), records of achievement (Broadfoot, 1988) and the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI, 1991). Its multiple origins and wide applicability have meant that action planning is a designation which covers a wide range of activities. At its most effective, it is a process which uses student centred dialogue with tutors to promote self awareness and self confidence, opportunity awareness and the development of planning skills at all stages of learning. At its minimal level, it is an interview which helps individuals select appropriate options at a particular learning or career stage. At its worst, it can be an intrusion into private matters.

The most effective approach for using action planning as a learning tool for young people is still being debated (Watts, 1993; Bullock & Jamieson, 1995), and there is some evidence to

suggest that the process of one-to-one or small group dialogue which underpins action planning produces more measurable effects with particular groups of young people (Bullock, et al, 1996), often those most in need of support. The recent reports from Sir Ron Dearing on qualifications for 16 - 19 year olds (1996) and careers education and guidance in the curriculum (1995) both emphasise the need for continued investigation into the processes and products which help students plan their learning; while the current climate of school effectiveness and improvement (for example see Hopkins et al., 1994; Reynolds, et al., 1996; Lauder, Jamieson & Wikeley, 1998) eagerly seeks evidence which clarifies the impact of particular strategies in raising student motivation and attainment.

This paper contributes to that debate by describing one aspect of an evaluation into an action planning initiative with Year 9 pupils (13 to 14 year olds) in a county in the east of England. Findings suggest that, in the main, this age group benefits from action planning processes, but in different ways for males and females. The implications for effective learning and school improvement are explored.

The initiative

The initiative was funded and supported by the local Careers Guidance Company and was described as '*a process which helps students recognise their academic and personal strengths and set targets for their development to maximise their potential and make realistic plans for the future*'. The scheme was called Personal Learning Planning (PLP) and it aimed to integrate the processes of records of achievement, careers education and guidance and action planning within three key strands: personal; academic and career or work-related.

The project started in the 1995/6 academic year with eighteen schools being awarded pilot contracts to set up their own PLP process with all Year 9 pupils. The organisation and delivery of PLP in the schools were supported by a PLP development team drawn from the careers service. Each school was required to identify a PLP coordinator who had responsibility for all matters relating to PLP within the school plus liaison with other school activities and curriculum strands and the careers service. Schools were accountable to the Careers Guidance Company, who in turn were accountable to the Government Office: Eastern Region (GO:ER), who determined careers service funding.

The first year of the scheme was reviewed by the careers service, and although this enabled clarification of issues with the schools, and improved documentation and contracting procedures, it was decided that an external evaluation was needed to determine how far the wider aims of the initiative had been met. The University of Bath was contracted to

undertake this evaluation at the start of the second year of the project when a further twelve schools had joined the scheme. The evaluation was funded by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and reported to a steering group comprising representatives from the DfEE, GO:ER, the Careers Guidance Company, the PLP development team and two of the participating schools. The remit for the evaluation was to extend and complement the monitoring information obtained by the careers service by investigating the quality, strengths, weaknesses and added value of PLP using a longitudinal model.

Methodology

The evaluation approach, therefore, involved a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods which not only measured changes in pupils' attitudes to constructs derived from the aims of the PLP process, but also informed tutors, coordinators and the PLP development team of on-going, noteworthy issues. Data were collected by a scrutiny of PLP documents; focused group meetings; semi-structured interviews with all the PLP coordinators; and a semantic differential questionnaire delivered twice to the same sample of pupils, at the beginning and at the end of the PLP process in Year 9.

In the 1996/97 academic year, the research followed two representative Year 9 tutor groups from twenty-nine of the institutions taking part in the PLP project. Twenty-seven of the institutions were mixed, mainstream, comprehensive schools and two were special schools. The school not taking part in the questionnaire survey had pupils with severe learning difficulties.

Using the evaluators' previous work in the area (Bullock and Jamieson, 1995; Bullock et al, 1996; Bullock and Jamieson, 1998) and the intended outcomes set out by the participating schools for the pilot phase, an initial set of key indicators of quality and added value of PLP for pupils was identified. Contrasting statements were placed at the opposite ends of a continuum and students were asked to indicate where they saw themselves at that moment in time. For example, for the key concept *self knowledge* a series of meaningful questions was constructed to test the students' perceptions. These questions were:

How well do you think you know your own skills and abilities?	*very well*		*not very well*
How well do you know what you can do to improve your skills and abilities?	*very well*		*not very well*
How clear are you about how well your teachers think you are doing in lessons?	*very clear*		*not very clear*

The draft questionnaire was examined by the steering group for face and content validity. It was then piloted with a representative group of Year 9 pupils attending three mainstream and two special schools drawn from the whole population of PLP schools. The results from the pilot were analysed for construct reliability and validity. Minor changes were made to the content and wording and the final 28 items in the semantic differential questionnaire measured the personal skills and traits intended to be supported and enhanced by PLP as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Construction of the Questionnaire

CONSTRUCT	EXAMPLE OF QUESTIONS	QUESTIONS NOs
Personal Understanding	*How well do you know your own skills and abilities?*	Q1, Q2, Q3,
Motivation	*How important is it for you to do well at school this year?*	Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8
Planning	*How clear are you about who you can talk to at school to help you plan your future?*	Q4, Q9, Q12
Target setting	*How easy is it for you to set yourself targets to work towards?*	Q10, Q11
Talking to people	*How well do you think your PLP tutor knows and understands you?*	Q13, Q14, Q15, Q16, Q17
Making choices	*How sure are you about what you want to do when you leave school?*	Q18, Q19
Using the careers library	*How often do you use books or leaflets to help you make choices about your future career?*	Q20
Attitude to learning	*How much has your PLP helped you to achieve something better at school?*	Q21, Q22, Q23, Q24, Q25, Q26, Q27, Q28

In addition, biographical details, including gender and a measure of attainment, based on pupils' judgements of their own abilities, were requested from each respondent. Space for pupils to add any other comments about their perceptions of the advantages or disadvantages of personal learning planning was included. Examples of the quotes from the second questionnaire are included in this analysis. The questionnaire was given to pupils in November 1996 and again in May 1997. As far as possible, the same pupils completed the questionnaire on both occasions. The samples are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Samples

	November 1996	May 1997
Girls	677	612
Boys	647	593
(No response)	(24)	(6)
TOTAL	1348	1211

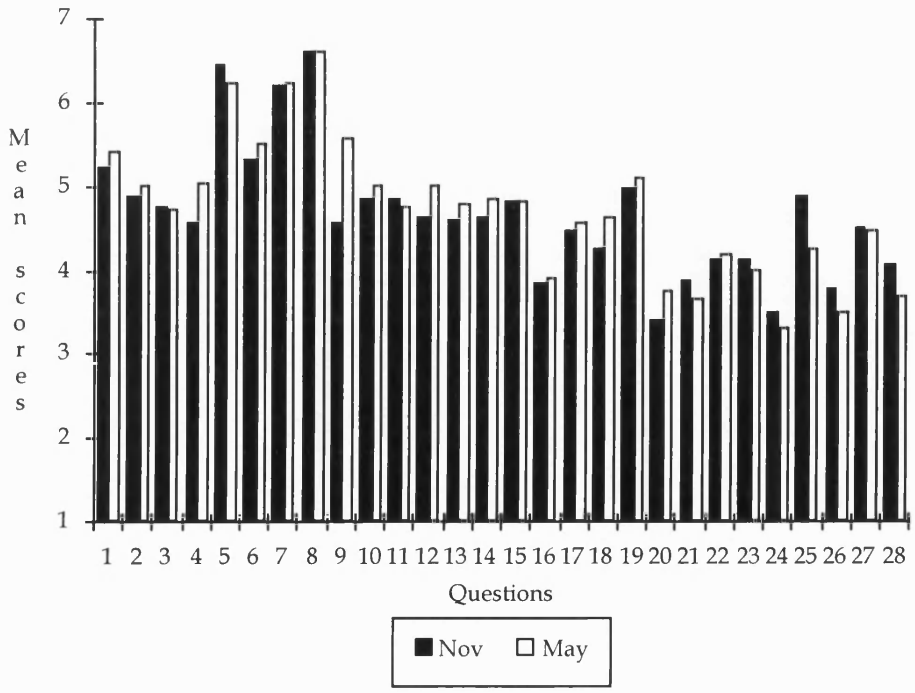
Responses to each statement in the questionnaire were scored from 1 to 7, with 7 being the most positive attitude. The mean attitudinal score for each question was calculated The shift in attitude over the period was found by subtracting the mean score in November from that in May. After subtraction the scores were rounded to two decimal places. Changes in attitude for the whole cohort and for boys and girls were found.

Overall Findings

Overall analysis of the questionnaire showed seventeen positive shifts in attitude, ten negative shifts and one item with no change. The differences for all the items are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Differences in attitude



The shift in attitude for the construct clusters are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Shift in attitude by cluster

CONSTRUCT	QUESTIONS	SHIFT
Personal Understanding	Q1, Q2, Q3,	2 positive; 1 negative; overall positive
Motivation	Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8	2 positive; 1 negative; 1 same; overall same
Planning	Q4, Q9, Q12	all positive
Target setting	Q10, Q11	1 positive; 1 negative; overall positive
Talking to people	Q13, Q14, Q15, Q16, Q17	all positive
Making choices	Q18, Q19	both positive
Using the careers library	Q20	positive
Attitude to learning	Q21, Q22, Q23, Q24, Q25, Q26, Q27, Q28	1 positive; 7 negative

Improved Skills and Attitudes

The greatest changes in attitude were found in the planning cluster. For Q9, '*How clear are you about which courses or options are best for you next year*' there was a positive shift of 0.99. This is equivalent to nearly all respondents moving their response by one box towards the positive end of the scale, and indicated that, almost without fail, pupils had become more confident in making informed choices over the time span between the two questionnaires. While this might generally be expected in the 'option choice' year, the correlation of the three questions relating to planning (see Table 3), combined with the positive shifts in making choices and using the careers library and the open comments appended by pupils, suggested that PLP is very successful in helping Year 9 pupils understand and become confident in the processes for making appropriate and sensible decisions.

> *PLP does help you to think about future opportunities and point out the advantages and disadvantages.*

> *It's good to identify what you are good at, and not so good at.*

Pupils also indicated that they had grown in their own personal understanding of their skills and abilities and how they could go about improving these. Although Q3, '*How clear are you*

about how well your teachers think you are doing in lessons?' showed a very slight overall negative shift of 0.03, the five items on communication and talking to adults all resulted in a positive shift. Other research (Ruddock et al., 1996) has shown that conversations with teachers are valued by pupils for both academic and social guidance. While a systematic requirement in Year 9 for an individual discussion with a tutor may initially seem daunting for some 13 year olds, familiarity with the particular arrangements for PLP in the school should encourage more self confident approaches, with pupils feeling increasingly comfortable and in control of the planning process and their subsequent actions. The necessity for all pupils to have such a conversation reduces any embarrassment or stigma and it is likely that time and resources allocated to at least one individual discussion between tutor and pupil in Year 9 has an impact with pupils which would not be realised through other, perhaps less resource-demanding, teaching strategies and activities.

Gives you more confidence.

You can have help to understand yourself with the aid of your teacher.

Responses to Question 8 which probed '*How keen are you to do well in your future career?*' remained constant for both data collections. This response was notable for its very high score (6.63). A positive correlation with other items in the motivation cluster was recorded, with Q7, '*How hard are you prepared to work to do well at school?*' scoring 6.23 in November and 6.26 in May, and Q5, '*How important is it for you to do well at school this year?*' dropping slightly over the six months from 6.47 to 6.25. These responses indicated that Year 9 pupils, at least rhetorically, are very keen to succeed.

Areas of Concern

From Figure 1 and Table 3, however, it was clear that while pupils were becoming more positive in many skills, understanding and attitudes related to PLP, very few were, at this point, able to appreciate the potential, wider outcomes (See Table 4).

Table 4

Changes in attitude to wider outcomes of PLP

ITEM	Mean 1 (n =1348) Mean 2 (n = 1211)
23 How much has your personal learning plan helped you to achieve something better at school?	4.14 4.03
24 How much has your personal learning plan helped you with your life outside school?	3.53 3.33
25 How much do you think that your personal learning plan will help you after you leave school?	4.91 4.27

While questions relating to motivation scored consistently highly and respondents avowed, almost without exception, high lifelong ambitions, it was disappointing that perceptions of PLP as an aid to immediate academic and personal development had waned. Comparison of the mean scores to Questions 23 to 25 indicated that pupils tended to see PLP more as a future career plan than a process to help them achieve now in school or, even less, at home. They had not yet recognised the incremental and cyclical nature of action planning which could lead to lifelong achievement.

Hard to discuss your future when it's so far away.

You might want to change, but I'm not sure that you can.

There also appeared to be a gap between the perceptions of tutors, for whom PLP was an opportunity to interact with, and learn about, their pupils at a more informal level; and the perceptions of some pupils for whom it was primarily a school requirement before making option choices. The relationship between tutor and pupil is clearly a factor in effective learning, but the tutor is only one of many subject teachers and the PLP dialogue only the first step to improved learning in school.

An explanation may lie in the acknowledgement by many tutors that pupils' skills of target setting were still unrefined. At the start of PLP, only a few institutions had linked target setting systematically into subject areas. One school had an effective arrangement where pupils set academic and personal targets in their PLP discussion and then selected a subject teacher or other adult to monitor them and indicate when achieved. This had the effect of

involving more staff in target setting and motivating the individual pupil to ensure that the target was met by an agreed date. In the long term, such target setting by pupils, themselves, are likely to be more effective than the statistically derived targets, calculated by advisers and teachers, which have been much discussed of late (Ofsted, 1996).

Nor, perhaps, had all tutors discussed with their pupils simple strategies for effective learning. It may be that these links need to be more clearly set out by tutors in one-to-one sessions, or explored in preliminary groupwork. It is likely that, in the longer term, the ongoing PLP process of listening to pupils' views will enable tutors to support pupils' understanding of their own learning, more effectively. This outcome may need to be made more explicit than at present and could involve some analysis of the nature of a particular task or clarification of what constitutes criterion for success. Teachers and PLP tutors may then be able to build on the undoubted long-term motivation of pupils by agreeing on what is good practice and emphasising its links with future success.

Although you talk to your tutor about what you want to do, there is not a lot of guidance about how to achieve it.

They are a waste of time for people who know exactly what's going on (like me!).

May help later in life but I'm not yet sure how.

A negative shift on extent of enjoyment of writing down personal plans and targets (Q21) was not unexpected and was consistent with evaluation findings from similar initiatives with older students (Broadfoot, 1988; Bullock & Jamieson, 1995). This research suggests that the dip in enthusiasm about recording is not particularly related to age, but neither is it common to all schools. Twenty-eight percent of the schools in this cohort showed a positive shift, with either their girls (7%), boys (14%) or both sexes (7%), to the question, *How much do you enjoy writing down your personal ideas and targets?*

They're difficult to write in words.

I think PLPs should spend more time on important things instead of writing a paper.

Other strands of this evaluation indicated that PLP tutors were aware of these sentiments and were designing appropriate strategies to respond to them, such as making joint notes or using audio tapes during discussions which students later used to write up their plan. Word

processing packages were also being tried out in some schools. One school had set aside ten minutes after each individual interview for pupils to sit quietly and comfortably on their own, reflecting on their discussion with the tutor, and writing a rough draft of their plan. At a later stage, this was written out more carefully on the designated proforma.

In enhancing learning, there is a balance to be maintained between helping pupils capture their learning plans comfortably and legibly, and allowing them to have ownership of the document (see Hargreaves, 1988; Pole, 1993). Pupil ownership implies that the use, style and content of the written plan is within their authority. Ownership by the school implies constraints of use, standard and presentation. Interviews and document scrutiny in this study showed that some schools have used the plan as a presentation document which is sent home to parents and that there is an almost universal tutor anticipation that it will be used in Year 10 as a basis for discussion leading to the Record of Achievement. While these expectations undoubtedly raise the profile and importance of the plan, they may simultaneously contribute to pupils' perceptions of it as a school-owned product and school-directed process.

The bottom line in this tension may be that it is very difficult for schools and tutors not to put some stress on the presentation of a final document which will undoubtedly be seen by parents and others, and hence may be judged as a reflection of effective teaching or tutoring. Tutors may also believe that pupils' perceptions of the value of a document which is not encouraged to be presented to acceptable standards is likely to be minimal. Whether or not this is the price of true pupil ownership, and whether or not it can be paid, may need to be debated by schools.

Gender Issues

Responses to the questionnaires were broken down by gender. Analysis indicated that for twenty items, the change in attitude for both sexes was almost identical. For the other eight items, however, there were notable differences in gender responses, suggesting that, in certain aspects, PLP tended to be more effective with boys than with girls. These items are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Comparison of change in attitude for boys and girls

ITEM	ALL Mean 1 (n =1348) Mean 2 (n = 1211)	FEMALES (n1 = 677) (n2 = 612)	MALES (n1 = 647) (n2 = 593)
3. *How clear are you about how well your teachers think you are doing in lessons?*	4.77 4.74	4.81 4.68	4.73 4.80
7. *How hard are you prepared to work to do well at school?*	6.23 6.26	6.36 6.31	6.08 6.21
14 *How easy is it for you to talk about your ideas and targets on your own with your PLP tutor?*	4.66 4.86	4.69 4.87	4.63 4.85
15 *How easy is it for you to talk about your ideas and targets in small groups with your PLP tutor and other students?*	4.83 4.85	4.88 4.92	4.79 4.78
19 *How sure are you about what you want to do when you leave school?*	4.99 5.11	4.88 5.11	5.11 5.11
22 *How clear are you about how you might use your record of personal ideas and targets?*	4.16 4.22	4.17 4.14	4.16 4.31
23 *How much has your personal learning plan helped you to achieve something better at school?*	4.14 4.03	4.15 3.99	4.13 4.08
24 *How much has your personal learning plan helped you with your life outside school?*	3.53 3.33	3.60 3.26	3.46 3.40

One example was Q3, '*How clear are you about how well your teachers think you are doing in lessons?*'. For this item, the overall score had decreased over the six months, but analysis revealed that this was wholly a function of more negative attitudes from girls. The boys, in fact, were clearer about their teachers' opinions of their efforts in May than in November.

My tutor explains everything clearly.

Similarly, the attitudes represented by Q7, '*How hard are you prepared to work to do well at school?*' and Q22, '*How clear are you about how you might use your record of personal ideas and targets?*' both showed a slight positive shift over the six months. Analysis indicated that this was a male rather than a female trend, with girls responding less positively in May than the

previous November. The disappointingly negative shifts in Q23, *How much has your personal learning plan helped you to achieve something better at school?*' and Q24, *How much has your personal learning plan helped you with your life outside school?*' were also more heavily influenced by the girls' attitudes than by those of the boys.

It has been suggested by tutors that this is partly a function of the earlier maturing and skills of reflection in adolescent girls. At age thirteen boys enter PLP with greater reluctance to analyse and plan their lives and the impact of the one-to-one conversation with a tutor may have been significant. Girls, on the other hand, may already be confident enough to initiate such conversations, and thus, are more cynical about the structured PLP process. Other explanations, for example, the gender of the tutor and the influence of particular groups of pupils within a school year are school specific and should have been have been balanced out in the sampling process.

Q14 and Q15 explored the nature of the discussions with tutors. In this project, schools were encouraged, but not compelled, to allocate time and resources for one-to-one discussion slots for each pupil with their tutor. Responses to these items indicated that ease with the one-to-one dialogue with tutors had markedly improved over the PLP span, whereas there was only a minimal shift in attitude to the, perhaps already familiar, small group sessions. Boys and girls showed no difference in their move to a more positive attitude towards the one-to-one sessions, but for small group discussions the shift for boys was negative compared to the slightly positive shift for girls. The commonly held perception that, in general, boys are less confident in discussion than girls is borne out by this study, but it seems that PLP has enabled boys to move from a preference for small group discussions to a point where they favour talking to tutors on their own.

The item which showed a clear positive shift in girls' attitudes compared to those of boys was Q19, *How sure are you about what you want to do when you leave school?* This correlated well with responses to the question on use of the careers library and appeared to indicate that PLP is more helpful with girls in encouraging systematic thinking and planning for their futures while the processes of one-to-one, or small group, discussions and subsequent recording may, at least in the initial stages, have greater effect with boys.

Responses to the questionnaires were also broken down by gender and school. The special schools were not included in this analysis as small numbers meant that results may have been skewed. Initial analyses by school have indicated that the current PLP schools can be grouped into three types. The first category, *gender neutral*, (n=13) showed no particular

differences between the change in attitudes of boys and girls, while the second group, *boy effective*, (n=9) comprised schools who appeared to be engendering more positive attitudes in their boys and the third group, *girl effective*, (n=5), showed more positive attitudes in their girls. Examples of these distinctions are illustrated in Figures 2 to 4. The columns represent the average attitudes of the whole cohort of boys and girls, and the points represent the attitudes of the boys and girls in the particular school. This was from the second data collection at the end of Year 9 after PLP activities.

Figure 2

Gender Neutral School

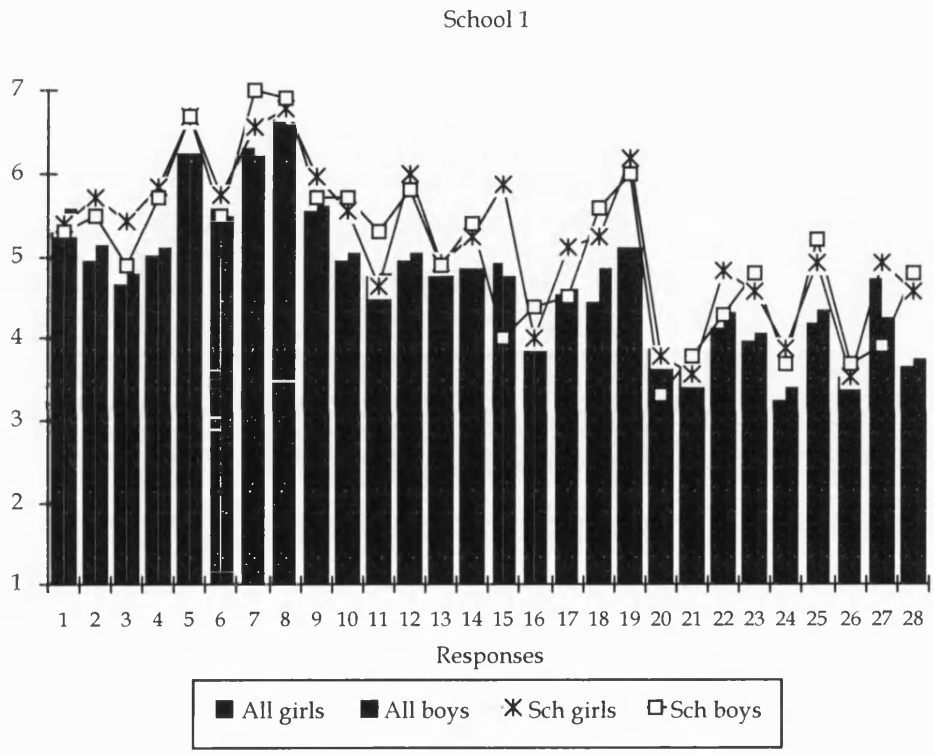


Figure 3

Boy Effective School

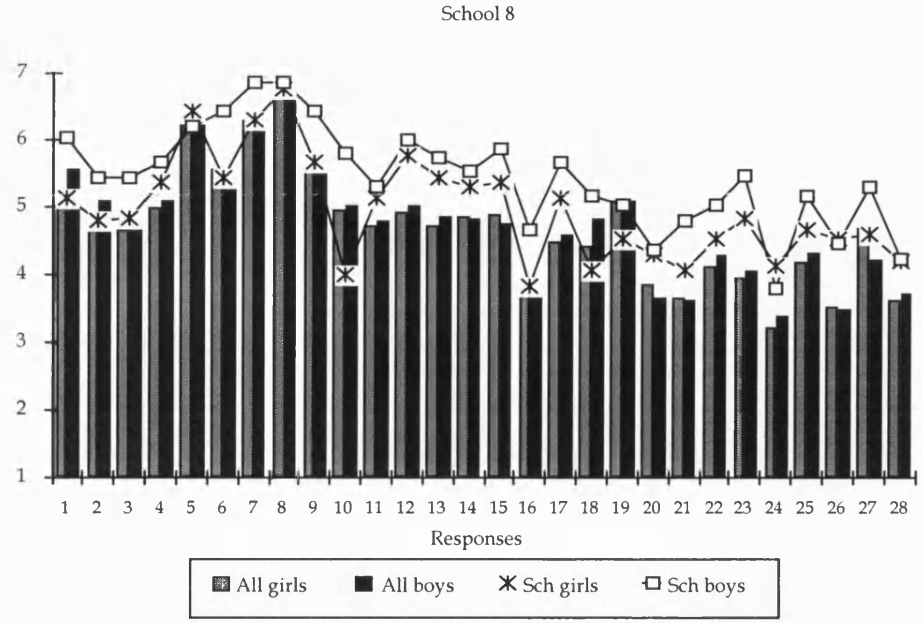
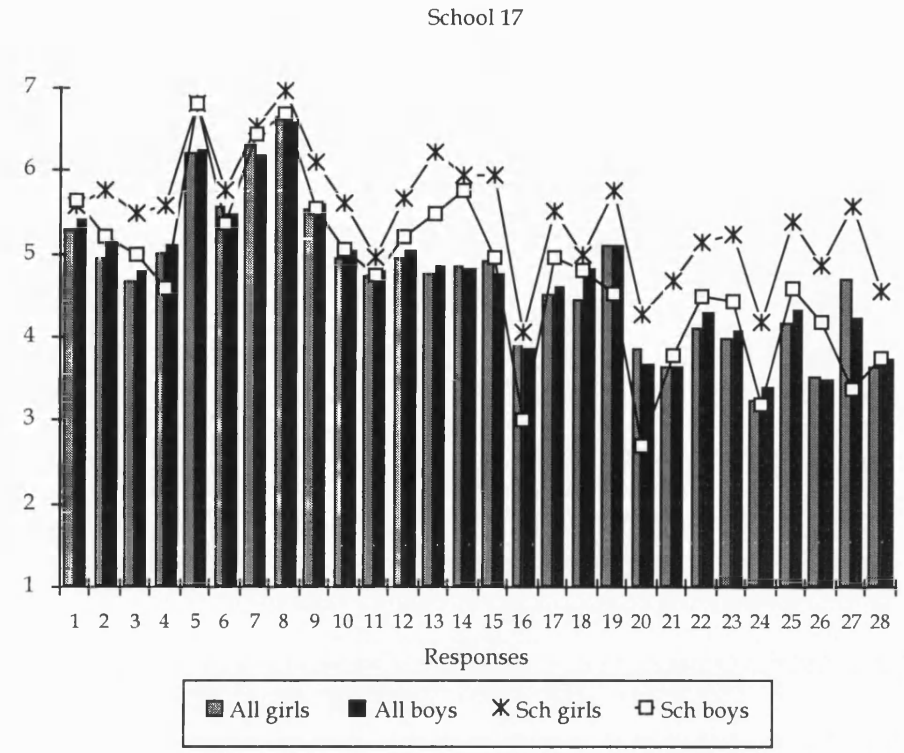


Figure 4

Girl Effective School



This is clearly an interesting phenomenon which seems to support the tenet that the systems, ethos and social milieu of schools can make a difference for individual pupils (Smith & Tomlinson, 1989; Reynolds et al., 1996). A number of explanations present themselves and are still being explored by this research. For example, the condition may be an institutional determinant; that is, there are characteristics of the school such as social or ethnic intake, emphasis on other ongoing initiatives, such as raising boys' achievement, or current ethos which makes the process more girl or boy enhancing. The tutor team delivering PLP may, by chance, be predominately male or female or may exhibit other attributes and enthusiasms which have undue influence. The most likely explanation, and one put forward by the tutors, is that it is a pupil factor, resulting from the social interactions and dominant groupings within a particular year. Understanding of these sociographic factors and their positive or negative influences within any school cohort may aid the effective delivery of interactive initiatives such as personal learning plans. One school where girls had, for many years, consistently outperformed boys in external examinations, was surprised to find that in PLPs they were boy effective. Any effect on future examination results will be monitored.

Conclusions

This research found that personal learning planning in Year 9 was regarded as a highly beneficial process by all the participating schools. This was particularly so when it was seen as a development of work already happening in the school. The main benefits of PLP were improved relationships between staff and students and in the communication skills of students.

As yet students tended to link PLP with making option and career choices and not with fundamental aspects of effective learning. In this respect, many saw the process as a teacher-led initiative and had little sense of ownership for themselves. This seemed to be at odds with tutors' perceptions of PLP as socially enriching and located in enhanced learning. It is important for tutors to acknowledge that this view of PLP is very difficult for pupils to comprehend and that there is need for careful introduction and explanation of the nature of action planning. The failure of both genders to relate PLP to these fundamental areas is a concern. Among the desired outcomes for PLP are greater individual autonomy and the development of skills for lifelong learning. Some reasons for this lack of development have already been discussed above, but it may take longer than six months for such benefits to be recognised. As one tutor said:

> *....there's probably a long way to go with children generally to get them to perceive education as something they're participants in rather than recipients of.....I think it's simply that we haven't got far enough down the line yet with the whole situation.*

PLP is a first step in supporting pupils to actively think about, and plan, their learning. The questionnaire will be delivered again when the sample reaches the end of Year 10 to investigate longer term outcomes. Nevertheless, integration of careers planning and personal learning planning need not necessarily be a weakness. Ultimately, one of the driving motivations to do well at school is the promise of success in the future.

There was strong indication that PLP shows different outcomes for boys and girls. Girls gain from earlier consideration of careers options and careful planning for choices while boys gain from one-to-one conversations with an adult which enhance communication and self understanding. Tutors involved in PLP style action planning should be aware of these differences in order to make the most effective use of such processes for their pupils and the school.

The time set aside for whole group tutorial activities in schools can amass to between two and three hours of a pupil's five day timetable. Overall, this is a significant slot (Reynolds, 1995) which needs to be used effectively, and hence, designed appropriately for each year group. This research suggests that at least fifteen minutes spent in individual discussions with a tutor, leading to specific target setting for improved learning, is highly productive for the majority of pupils, and particularly matches needs in Year 9, when youngsters are required to make informed decisions about their futures. Timetabling for one-to-one interviews should be a priority in Year 9, even at the expense of other tutorial group activities.

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(2000)

LEARNING FROM GCSE COURSEWORK

FULL REPORT OF RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS

ESRC Research Award No. R000222684

Background

This study was a small-scale, collaborative inquiry by a team of university and teacher-researchers. It was set in the context of an international concern that educational systems are not laying the appropriate foundations for a high skills, high trust workforce (Brown and Lauder, 1992). British researchers studying Pacific Rim educational systems (e.g. Reynolds, 1997; MacBeath, 1997) report that the development of skills associated with creativity, critical thinking and the capacity for life-long learning are becoming valued above others and that a tightly constrained curriculum as we have in the UK is no longer appropriate (OECD, 1996; Bentley and Seltzer, 1999; Koh, 2000). This report explores the extent to which the constructs of creativity, critical thinking and independent learning (CCI) are facilitated in students' learning during their GCSE coursework in geography and English.

At the inception of the GCSE in 1988, coursework was regarded as a central component of the examination to raise the validity of the assessment process and enhance the learning of students. Coursework in the GCSE provided a useful vehicle for communication skills and gave students credit for initiating tasks and assuming responsibility for their own work (SEC, 1985). Two recent contributions to the debate about coursework and learning, namely the Green Paper, *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998), and the report of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) (DfEE, 1999), go further. They argue that schools - through classwork, homework and coursework - should provide opportunities for students to acquire knowledge and skills associated with creativity, critical thinking and independent learning (CCI) in an attempt to foster and sustain lifelong learning.

Gipps (1992) argues that coursework is the least constrained form of authentic or performance assessment. It is an obvious element within the GCSE framework that retains the potential to encourage the development of CCI in young people. However,

accountability procedures in the UK education system increasingly require that GCSE results be used as a measure of school, department and teacher performance rather than exclusively as a gauge of student attainment. As a result, studies suggest, less tangible transferable skills such as CCI are being marginalised whilst teachers focus on assessment requirements and 'what is seen to count, and what can be counted' (Ashcroft and James, 1999; Black and Wiliam, 1998).

Our own recent research (Bishop *et al*, 1997) confirms that although students find coursework highly motivating, its potential benefits are increasingly at odds with the wider function of assessment within schools and the world of work, serving summative and selection purposes primarily. For teachers, this is crystallised in a conflict of purpose between high stakes assessment and widening the framework for assessment (Nuttall, 1995). The study, therefore, is focused by two pressures that might lead to a marginalisation of the teaching and learning dimension originally ascribed to coursework by the Secondary Examinations Council (1985):

- the traditional summative view of assessment (Scott, 1991); and
- the contemporary demands of society to make schooling accountable.

As the study concludes the movement to produce a future workforce 'capable of advanced learning, knowledge creation, and creativity leap-frogging' (p. 99) is not only beginning to re-emerge in the UK, but is continuing to gather pace around the Pacific Rim. In Singapore, for example, the emphasis on depth and understanding, reducing curriculum content, fostering creativity and injecting critical thinking skills, is restructuring the educational agenda (Koh, 2000). Such trends bring greater urgency to the outcomes of this research.

Objectives

The broad aim of this research was to explore the potential of GCSE coursework as a framework for learning. Within this aim, specific objectives were to investigate:

1. The extent to which the original qualities attributed to coursework are achieved in current practice.
2. The extent to which coursework contributes to the development of skills associated with independent learning, critical thinking and creativity.
3. The influence of the demands of assessment upon students' learning.

The objectives were met as originally planned through the three stages of data collection: exploratory and continuing discussion with teacher-researchers; interview data collection

with students, parents and teachers, and scrutiny of selected pieces of coursework; and the validation conference.

Objective 1 was met in full. The data collected from students, parents and teachers suggested that the original qualities attributed to coursework, such as the development of communication skills and independent learning, continue to be part of the curriculum experience, at least to some extent. Overall, current practice remains broadly similar to that found by Scott, in 1991, with coursework providing opportunities for higher level learning skills. However, in many cases there is an increasing tendency for the potential for learning to be constrained by the nature of the assessment framework, which in turn influences the structuring of coursework by teachers (see below).

The data provide detailed evidence of the stakeholders' perceptions of the value of coursework and of the variety of ways it is organised and supported at school and at home. However, instances of specific strategies to support creativity, critical thinking and independent learning were less obvious and were subsumed into the generality of approaches to coursework. For example, lower ability students benefited from and were motivated by mixed-ability activities and discussions.

As a major focus of this research, *Objective 2* was achieved. Initial work with the teacher-researchers provided a working framework for the identification of students' CCI, grounded in the teachers' practice. The semi-structured interviews with students, their parents and their teachers, probed in-depth how the students organised and set about their coursework, how they sought help, and how they judged their own and others' coursework. As a result, the data provided us with a basis to comment upon the relationship between GCSE coursework and the skills associated with CCI. Although we obtained useful data from these interviews it was, nevertheless, limited by the lack of distinction by students and parents between learning from coursework and learning from school work in general. This reflected three inter-related and recurring themes within our discussions with teachers and the data produced by the teacher-researchers:

- firstly, the general perception that there was little evidence of *transfer* by students of the skills, styles and understanding of learning engaged with in the various subject bases and domains for their coursework;
- secondly, the effects of the *framing* associated with teachers' expectations and approaches to coursework, primarily through 'scaffolds' and 'models', in structuring the conditions and opportunities for the demonstration and identification of CCI; and

- thirdly, a tendency by students (of both genders and all ability bands) to *comply* with teachers' expectations and approaches throughout the GCSE (exceptions are discussed in the Results section).

The participants throughout the research and at the validation conference welcomed ongoing dialogue about such findings, and the research process by which they were produced. Whilst the study did not explicitly set out to challenge or change ways of thinking or modes of practice, participants noted that a positive effect of involvement in the study for teacher-researchers and their colleagues was its catalytic value for teaching and learning in the schools and departments involved.

The range of insights gained into the influence that the assessment framework has on student learning through coursework led us to consider that *Objective 3* was fully achieved. The data derived from the interviews and the coursework scrutiny suggest that while correspondence exists at departmental level, and subject identities can be invoked to account for the resemblances between approaches to coursework (Goodson, 1993), individual teachers operating in different schools clearly perceive coursework and its functions in multifarious and idiosyncratic ways. As a consequence, the impact on students can be equally diverse. Interviews with boys and girls of different abilities offer some fascinating descriptions of their approaches to coursework and how the 'rules of the game' affect them and their attitudes towards it. Parents, all too aware of allegations surrounding the ownership and authenticity of coursework, tend to 'stand back' from their child's coursework despite their wishes to be supporters of, and critical friends in, the process of completing coursework. Contrasting their perceptions with their teachers' and parents' perceptions has allowed us to identify some important themes which prepare the ground for more detailed research in the future.

Methods

Structure and design

A key feature of this research was the involvement of teachers at a senior departmental level with responsibilities for English or geography in each school to act as partner researchers within the research team. Funding was built into the project to allow the teachers to be fully integrated in the design of the main data collecting instruments and the data gathering and analysis. The six colleagues involved in the research contributed a practitioner dimension to each stage of the design that would have been difficult to imitate through either a questionnaire- or an interview-based study alone.

As stated in the proposal, qualitative and interpretive traditions informed the research methods. While the design had been specified to some degree in the proposal, university and teacher-researchers continually negotiated the purposes and substance of the research strategies. Our approach shares the characteristics of the naturalistic paradigm of Guba and Lincoln (1985) in: (a) the cycles of research activity, (b) identifying and focusing constructs, (c) selecting and developing research instruments (including participants-as-researchers), and (d) the comparative and iterative approaches to data analysis and reporting. The structure and timing followed that set out in the proposal (see Appendix 1). Throughout the project key features of research have been the involvement and inclusion of teacher-researchers, and the progressive focusing of the techniques for creating and indexing data and their interpretation.

A range of considerations informed the choice of English and geography as the subject bases for the study. English is a core subject within the national curriculum and compulsory at Key Stage 4, geography a foundation subject and optional at Key Stage 4. Selecting two contrasting subjects was considered manageable within the scope of the project and the subject choices coincide with the interests of the University team and prospective link teachers within schools. While school geography is often regarded as a bridge between the science and art domains (e.g. Geographical Association, 1999), approaches and outcomes within coursework tend to stress the former rather than the latter. As a result, coursework for the two subjects can differ markedly, as can opportunities to develop and demonstrate CCI (see Appendix 14).

Samples

The aim of the sampling was to construct multi-site case studies of school departments in six schools through in-depth interviews (see Stenhouse, 1982 and Scott, 1991). The school sample was generated by considering the age range, size, gender mix, location and funding of the schools in order to provide a variety of contexts for the investigations (for a similar argument see Grant, 1989).

School	Age range	Size	Student gender	Location (i.e. catchment)	FSM	Funding
a	11-18	600	Male	Urban	Above average	LEA
b	11-18	1400	Mixed	Semi-rural	Below average	LEA
c	11-18	1200	Mixed	Rural	Average	LEA
d	11-18	1400	Mixed	Semi-rural	Below average	LEA
e	11-18	1200	Mixed	Urban	Below average	LEA
f	11-18	1400	Mixed	Semi-rural	Well below average	LEA

The student sample comprised students who were entered for both GCSE English and geography. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with a stratified random sample comprising six students in each case study school. Selection for the student interviews by the teachers considered gender, level of attainment and socio-economic mix. Where possible, an equal number of girls and boys were selected according to teachers' predicted grades and information about home support.

Research strategies

The preliminary phase of the research was the identification of six participant schools and the teacher-researchers. The research began with two whole project team meetings to: (i) consider the aims and design of the project, (ii) explore initial perspectives on the conduct and constructs of the research, based on a review of the literature and the teachers' experiences (see Appendices 1&3), and (iii) address issues of ethics and confidentiality (BERA's code of ethics was adopted). This was followed by semi-structured interviews with each teacher-researcher on the relationship between coursework, student learning and the three constructs.

Instrument development was dependent upon a collegial process involving contributions from all the researchers. Indicators of the three constructs were generated and, after consultation in the six schools and the University, used to develop the research instruments for students, teachers and parents. The instruments were piloted before being reviewed and modified into final form for use with the interviewees during the course of the project. The processes and products for ensuring that the instruments had appropriate sensitivity and credibility in the schools are illustrated in the flowcharts in Appendix 3, and the interview schedules and code books in Appendices 4-13.

The interview programme was carried out as indicated in the proposal and is detailed in Appendix 2. A brief summary follows:

1. Semi-structured, face to face interviews were conducted individually with the same students on two occasions; the first during Year 10 in the spring term 1999, and again during Year 11 in the autumn term of 1999. The second interviews were informed by the team scrutiny of coursework to probe students' views on their own independent learning, critical thinking and creativity. The interviews explored evidence of links between coursework and attitudes and strategies in relation to students' approaches to learning and completing coursework.

2. Telephone interviews with parents were conducted prior to the second student interview. They covered issues exploring parental support and attitudes, and ways in which home background links with coursework performance and organisation.

3. The teacher-researchers undertook teacher interviews with colleagues they identified in the two subject areas of English and geography. The interviews explored issues concerning the organisation and assessment of coursework and in relation to the opportunity for developing the three constructs.

A half-day validation conference was held in the final stage of the research to which parents and the teacher-researchers and their colleagues were invited to attend along with the University-researchers (students were not invited in order to protect their anonymity). The aim of the conference was to validate and seek to explain further the emerging theories, and constituted a final round of data collection and reporting within the project itself.

Throughout the project we have used qualitative data analysis software to support the preparation, management (indexing and searching) and analysis of the data. Transcripts of the interviews were prepared in line with the 'minimalist protocols' suggested by Fairclough (1989) necessary to enable construct analysis. Electronic versions of the transcripts were entered into a project database on QSR's NUD.IST Vivo (NVivo) software, accompanied by interview schedules, summaries from the literature review, and memos on coding and ongoing analysis. Data analysis strategies integrated interview question- and construct-based index systems and searches of indexes and documents, with matrix, set and attribute facilities within the software (Richards, 1999). 'Axial nodes' about coursework within the project database focused on: the three constructs; framing, support and organisation of coursework; assessment (criteria, processes, products); learning styles and the nature of

learning in coursework; purpose, value and worth attributed to coursework; and transferable skills. (See Appendices 5-13)

Results

The background to this report sets out the context in which GCSEs were developed and draws attention to how CCI might be embedded within principles and practices (e.g. SEC, 1985). This section discusses themes from the data analysis that relate to each objective in turn. Six major themes were identified.

Objective 1

Objective 1 focused on the extent to which the original qualities attributed to coursework are achieved in current practice.

1. Teachers, students and parents agreed that a significant outcome from coursework was students' improved ability to initiate tasks and assume responsibility for their own work. This independence, in turn, engendered motivation for learning and positive feelings about the value of coursework. Coursework was also valued because different skills were assessed through coursework tasks.

We found no dissent from the original claim that students learn better through coursework and that coursework encourages independent learning. All respondent groups explained 'learned better' in terms of retaining skills and knowledge, finding out for themselves and being motivated (see Entwistle, 1981; Gipps, 1994). However, independent learning was thought by all groups to be contingent on clear guidance from teachers to underpin student activities. Nonetheless, students constantly claimed ownership of their projects. They believed that, although paired work and group work were often used, they were in control of their own learning. Evidence to support students' claims were teachers' observations that students decide how to respond to the task, which resources to select and how to obtain information and contact appropriate people. Students distinguished classwork and coursework by the lack of formal teacher input in coursework sessions and teachers thought students asked more pertinent and insightful questions about coursework. Parents indicated that, despite being very willing to help, their children did not often want to involve them in their coursework. All groups recognised that coursework demands subject knowledge plus some or all of the transferable skills of literacy, numeracy, presentation and organisation. However, the validation conference highlighted that it is the integration of all these attributes that needs to be demonstrated in coursework. When it occurs this synthesis conveys the qualities attributed to coursework. Integration can only come from the individual student and supports 'deep' learning (Riding and Read, 1996; James and Gipps,

1998). The assessment of these transferable skills will then provide a more valid and authentic measure of students' potential (Gipps, 1992).

Objective 2

Objective 2 focused on the extent to which coursework contributes to the development of skills associated with CCI.

2. Teachers' and students' constructs of creativity differed considerably, and dominant views were identified. Conceptions of creativity were: creativity-as-problem-solving (teachers), and creativity-as-individual-expression (students). Key issues emerged around conceptions of the role of the individual vs. interaction and support; and scaffolding, transfer and application vs. expressiveness and freedom.

We observed that the subject domain acted as a dominant influence on the nature of the creativity demonstrated by the students. Teachers view geography coursework promoting the skills associated with critical thinking (clarifying meaning, analysing arguments or issues, evaluating claims, drawing warranted inferences) rather than creativity. In contrast, English coursework is not required to be literal and realist. Thus, while critical thinking remains a defining characteristic, English coursework offers more diverse opportunities for pupils to demonstrate evidence of creativity.

For teachers, creativity was found to be associated with flexibility, problem-solving and application. This has a parallel with innovators in the adaptor-innovator theory (Kirton, 1987). Their priorities indicated a relative view of creativity emphasising processing, organisation and elaboration of knowledge and skills. For example, teachers developed schemas and opportunities for students to think about information, ask questions, consider meaning and significance, and examine links to other information in and outside the subject. In contrast, students tended towards being adaptors with an absolute view of creativity that focused on the product, thus privileging notions of exceptionality, originality and inspiration in what it means to be creative (cf. NACCCE's *elite* definition of creativity (DfEE 1999)). These notions were countered by teachers and parents emphasising the importance of 'getting on', 'the rules of the game' and the techniques and strategies required for completing coursework and beyond (cf. NACCCE's *democratic* definition (DfEE 1999)). Teachers thought their ideals were often limited in practice by the assessment framework, emphasis on raising attainment and accountability.

3. Teachers' expectations of critical thinking focus on extending prior knowledge and experience, encouraging students to test out and apply new knowledge, and promoting learner responsibility through reflection and evaluation. Few students associate these features with success in coursework.

In general, students' notions of critical thinking are both limited and unsophisticated, focusing on criticism (often negative), being critical, and being sceptical. Only in a few higher ability students is perception of relevance to other tasks and subjects realised and pursued. Teachers of English and geography preferred notions of logic, explanation, rationality and controversy, particularly political and ideological contestation, as did the majority parents (Bailin, 1999a, 1999b). Teachers suggested that debating controversies has the potential to enhance creativity, yet few students see beyond the task to grasp the wider opportunities expected in tasks focusing on analysis and evaluation (Halpern, 1998). In practice, writing frames and scripts (in English) and investigations into controversial issues (in geography) rely on structured questioning strategies to develop critical thinking skills - geography's 'route to enquiry' (Rawling, 2000) and 'thinking through geography' approaches (Leat, 1998) exemplify this. We found that students associated critical thinking with high stress situations at the whole class or the individual level. For example, in confrontations where the 'cards are stacked' in the teacher's favour and in perceived challenges to individuality and identity. In contrast, student-student interactions in small group work (discussing texts and media in English, carrying out fieldwork in geography), were valued by all as more conducive to fostering explicitly the skills of critical thinking and reflection (Morehouse, 1997).

4. In coursework students engage in a hybrid learning experience in which autonomy in the organisation of the individual learning process is mediated and constricted by teachers and their interpretations of a heavily prescribed coursework and assessment framework.

Challenges to the features of independent learning listed in (1) above arise from the variety in students' conceptions of learning and associated differences in their preferences and motivation for particular learning goals and ways of teaching. Students are generally very receptive to opportunities to learn more about learning - organising and managing their learning, how to become more independent - and demonstrated this in the interviews. However, a directed approach to completing coursework encourages routine task completion, rather than thoughtful, independent learning. Although independent learning through coursework might decouple the outcome from a particular classroom pedagogy (e.g. enquiry learning in geography), we found little evidence of this process taking place, as

in students choosing different (i.e. non-routine) ways to learn and demonstrate what was needed.

Objective 3

Objective 3 focused on the influence of the demands of assessment upon students' learning.

5. With the exception of high ability students the locus of control for carrying out coursework lies largely with teachers. Teachers thought that low ability students do not achieve their potential but achieve more than they would without the support from them. In contrast high ability students may achieve their potential but can be limited by ceilings imposed by the criteria or the ways teachers interpret them.

Teachers described strategies they used to support lower ability students attain the highest possible marks in coursework. They thought that a tension existed between the degree of support that students needed to maximise their marks and the flexibility to develop their own ideas more fully. They questioned whether students also felt this tension. Most students were supported by teachers segmenting their learning into attainable chunks. Teachers, however, did not indicate that they told students about such strategies, which raised a question of whether this limits the extent to which the students learn from teacher support. Some higher ability students abandoned suggested structures and did their own thing. Coursework can be structured to support students doing coursework but this does not need to militate against independence. Structuring by teachers is seen as a response to the current coursework climate rather than the ideal environment for completing coursework. There was a tendency to agree that low(er) ability students see the locus of control as external (and this is an obstacle to developing critical thinking, creativity and independent learning) in contrast to high(er) ability students who see the locus of control as internal.

6. Assessment drives the learning process and over-rides practically every other aspect of curriculum, learning and teaching. Teachers assume that students will perceive the demands of learning and assessment in the same way that they do. In fact, students tend not to understand what the assessment criteria actually require from them.

Part of students' motivation in coursework is related to the grade received for the work. Just how much of the motivation could be attributed to extrinsic gains was difficult to measure. Invariably, students believed content and presentation to be important to the assessment criteria, whereas teachers were more concerned that coursework should, for example, demonstrate a coherent argument. Although most students acknowledged that CCI (indicated by structure, argument and understanding) would 'get them marks', only a few

knew how and why to show it in their coursework, by demonstrating that they had answered the question and evaluated their own effort. Students tended to equate more effort with more writing and hence the achievement of higher grades; their view was that 'more equals better'. Students told us that they recognised the assessed product did not represent all of their learning; in other words there was little accreditation for the processes involved in doing the coursework, only for the product. Exceptionally, more experienced teachers and a minority of students recognised that neither teachers nor students were compelled to follow particular coursework practices. This was despite the claims about conflicts between managerial and accountability agendas and the forces of professional practices which influenced the majority of teachers' approaches. However, in order to have access to the higher grades, most teachers now tend to coach students in specific techniques and to look for evidence of these in their assessments. There can be no doubt that in a potential conflict between grades and independent learning, a higher grade would be the preference for students, teachers and parents.

Implications

a) For teachers and school managers

There is a mismatch between teachers' strategies for communicating coursework requirements effectively and students' understanding of this. In particular, teacher feedback does not consistently match the weaknesses identified in students' work. Teachers believe they are clear in terms of their expectations for completing coursework and communicating this to their students. However, 'telling students' is not sufficient. Students could be helped by teachers modelling their expectations of doing coursework, by the provision of examples of good and poor coursework *and* of involving students in such discussions.

The research showed teachers benefit from the opportunity to discuss learning through coursework at an intellectual level allowing them to focus on broader, philosophical and professional perspectives rather than the day to day practicalities of managing the process. Discussions within and across departments proved to be a catalyst for improving practice.

The key to independent learning is finding the critical balance between support and autonomy for each student. Awareness of good practice, and reflections on learning do not feature as strongly in student-talk as in teacher-talk. More encouragement for students to consider these issues should be incorporated into teachers' practice.

b) For Examining Groups and policy-makers

It is evident that CCI have a role in producing good quality coursework. The research suggests that there has a been a recent shift in the way that teachers and students play the assessment game at GCSE, i.e. 'boxing clever'. At the inception of the GCSE, coursework was perceived to enhance the validity of the assessment process. Now teachers have learned the rules of the game and are aiming to maximise pupils' attainment. As a consequence the coursework element of the GCSE is losing its discriminatory function. The irony is that this does not detract from the esteem in which it is held by teachers, students and parents. It fulfils the original aspirations of enhancing opportunities for student learning, and is deemed to be both authentic and fair in the assessment framework.

GCSE coursework is typically viewed as an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary change to learning practices. Substantial change in learning approaches of students of all abilities tends not to occur, although the significance, value and intensification of current approaches are recognised, particularly in the amount of time now spent on coursework. Although students can recognise that coursework fosters creative exchanges of ideas, these benefits tend not be transferred readily to other learning situations. In contrast to current political thinking (i.e. NACCCE (DfEE, 1999)) the study shows that the development and demonstration of CCI does not require the abandonment of existing approaches to learning, or replacement by new ones.

Activities

The following papers and workshops have been presented or submitted for presentation:

Bishop, K., Bullock, K., Martin, S. and Reid, A. D. (1999) *Learning from GCSE Coursework* (as part of a Symposium on Perspectives on Supporting Student Learning), Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference, Brighton, September.

Martin, S., Bishop, K., Bullock, K. and Reid, A. D. (2000) *Learning from GCSE Coursework: Fostering independent learning, critical thinking and creativity?*, Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference, Cardiff, September.

A presentation and workshop was given to the Suffolk Middle Schools Headteachers' Conference, 11-13 October, 2000, Bath, *Creativity, critical thinking and independent learning: important constructs for life or of no relevance to the classroom?*

The following paper has been submitted for the American Education Research Association annual conference, Seattle, 2001.
Martin, S., Reid, A. D., Bullock, K., and Bishop, K. *Developing and demonstrating creativity, critical thinking and independent learning: the potential and constraints of coursework.* (Division B1: Curriculum Inquiry in Classroom Contexts).

The following presentation and workshop will be given at the Geographical Association's Annual Conference, Brighton, April, 2001.
Reid, A. D. and Jones, M. *Enhancing learning through geography coursework.*

Outputs

Due to the short time scale of the project, activities and outputs have focused on conference papers and small scale dissemination. However, several articles are planned to disseminate findings on a wider scale, specifically literature reviews of the three constructs as well as an article for the Journal of Curriculum Studies for disseminating the main project findings and implications for policy makers and practitioners.

A book is planned for publication by the Geographical Association. Negotiations have taken place for a book aimed at practitioners which focuses on current practice in relation to completing coursework from the perspectives of teacher, student and parent and implications for improving practice. A theme of the publication will be the constraints and conditions of completing coursework.

Dataset for ESRC archive.

Impacts

The paper presented at BERA 2000 was reported in the Times Educational Supplement, *How to steer coursework,* 22 September p.26. This and the paper presented (*Learning from GCSE Coursework: Fostering independent learning, critical thinking and creativity*?) have been followed up by the following areas:
BBC education, advisory service, teacher-researcher, teacher education, headteachers, ATL, Effective Teaching and Learning Network.

An impact from this research was felt in the case study schools where teachers parents and students were pleased to have been consulted feeling that their opinions had been heard and valued. In particular, teacher-researchers' thought that their involvement in the research had:

- stimulated debate within their own faculties/ department;
- provided them with insights into colleagues', students' and parents' views;
- provided opportunities for sharing views and clearing up misunderstandings/ different perceptions;
- enabled them to look back on their own practice;
- enabled them to formalise policy and practice more clearly having been made to think about issues that were previously unarticulated;
- provided an insight into doing research.

See also Appendix 15 for further details of the impact on school practice.

Future Research Priorities

The themes identified in this modest study suggest areas to be tested in a wider arena. Future research should corroborate and elaborate issues relating to the conditions and constraints affecting the development and demonstration of CCI? This could be approached from three perspectives. For example:

At an *individual level*

Students - What is the nature of the cognitive strengths and weaknesses displayed by the student? Does their personality and motivation conform to the traditional view of the creative, critical, independent personality? What role do social-psychological factors play? From a longitudinal perspective, how are CCI related to different points in life, and in different domains? How does the student cope with controversy e.g. locus of control?

Teachers - How can teachers be encouraged to shed the 'false dualism' mantle, i.e. that teaching towards examinations and teaching for lifelong learning are mutually exclusive, acceding to the pressures from external agencies relating to assessment? How can teachers be supported in developing strategies which support independent learning and student autonomy and in effectively communicating strategies for best performance?

At a *subject domain level*

What is the nature of the subject and the subject discourse with which the students work? What kinds of creative, critical, independent practices are routinely engaged with in their subjects, effectively? How susceptible is subject and subject pedagogy to the development of CCI and to teachers' understanding and interpretation of them? To what extent can CCI be encouraged through all subjects, extending beyond English and geography?

At a *school level*

What is the role of middle and senior management in encouraging and adopting approaches which raise the status of CCI, both at student, teacher and department level? Are the conditions and constraints for developing CCI culturally located?

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LEARNING FROM COURSEWORK IN ENGLISH AND GEOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

As an element of high stakes assessment, coursework was originally intended to raise the validity of the assessment process and to enhance the learning of students. In recent years, this purpose has been distorted by the increasing requirements for educational institutions to demonstrate standards and to be accountable. This small, ESRC-funded study used in-depth qualitative approaches to explore the nature and processes of learning from coursework in national examinations undertaken by 16 year-old students. Among other things, it probed the extent to which qualities such as independent learning, critical thinking and creativity were developed through coursework. The research found that, while the practice underpinning coursework had the capacity to support deeper and more independent learning, the pressures of achieving good grades mediated against all pupils reaching the optimum level of higher order thinking.

KEYWORDS

Learning, Coursework, Assessment, Creativity

(5911 words)

Introduction

In the United Kingdom, coursework is a required element of the national examinations taken by the majority of 16 year olds. In addition to the written, timed examinations in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), independent pieces of work undertaken for credit, typically attract around 20% to 25% of marks in any subject area. For students and teachers, both the marks awarded and the skills applied contribute to the particular significance of coursework. This paper arises from a small-scale, collaborative inquiry funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It was carried out by a team of university and teacher-researchers and explored the nature of students' learning during their GCSE coursework in English language and geography.

These two subject areas were selected because of their potentially different approaches to coursework. Implications of the research for these particular curriculum areas were identified and are addressed in forthcoming work (e.g. Martin et al., in press). However, this article aims to derive more general issues and tensions from the specific findings. We anticipate that the generality of coursework as an approach found in every strand and level of education may make this paper worthwhile for all those interested in the processes of teaching and learning.

Rationale For The Research

The context for the study was an international concern that educational systems are not laying the appropriate foundations for a high skills, high trust workforce (Brown and Lauder, 1992). This was exacerbated in the UK by a growing unease that a tightly constrained curriculum is no longer appropriate (OECD, 1996; Bentley and Seltzer, 1999; Koh, 2000). British researchers studying Pacific Rim educational systems (e.g. Reynolds, 1997; MacBeath, 1997) noted that, there, the development of skills associated with creativity, critical thinking and independent learning are becoming valued above others; while in the UK, activities such as coursework that might retain the potential to encourage the development of these skills in young people are being marginalised (Ashcroft and James, 1999; Black and Wiliam, 1998).

The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) was introduced to the UK, in 1988, as an examination suitable for 80% of 16-year old students. At that time, coursework was regarded as a central component of the examination which would raise the validity of the assessment process and enhance the learning of students. Coursework in the GCSE, it was argued, would provide a useful vehicle for communication skills and give students credit for initiating tasks and assuming responsibility for their own work (SEC, 1985).

Almost 15 years later, the focus of the examination has shifted towards the use of GCSE outcomes as a measure of school performance and accountability with the result that the reliability and the value of the coursework component has been brought into question (Tattersall, 1994). This is despite two recent contributions to the debate about coursework and learning, namely the Green Paper, *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998), and the report of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) (DfEE, 1999), which argue that schools - through classwork, homework and coursework - should provide opportunities for students to acquire knowledge and skills associated with creativity, critical thinking and independent learning in an attempt to foster and sustain lifelong learning. However, with its findings that UK students nearing school leaving age are well above the international average when it come to applying knowledge and demonstrating life skills, the most recent report from OECD (2001) may accentuate the value of activities such as coursework and act to redress the balance. In the meantime, there is a need to clarify experiences and outcomes from coursework in order to build on success and understand limitations.

The Research Design

This study was a small-scale, collaborative inquiry by a team of university and teacher-researchers in six case study schools. The broad aim of the research was to explore the potential of GCSE coursework as a framework for learning. Within this aim, specific objectives were to investigate:

1. The extent to which the original qualities attributed to coursework are achieved in current practice.
2. The extent to which coursework contributes to the development of skills associated with independent learning, critical thinking and creativity.
3. The influence of the demands of assessment upon students' learning.

The preliminary phase of the research involved the identification of six participant schools and the teacher-researchers. The six teacher researchers were drawn equally from geography and English backgrounds and all were keen to be involved in the research. The composition of the research team largely dictated the school sample. Nonetheless, the school sample represented a range of circumstances (including size, gender mix, socio-economic status and location) for the investigations. All six schools covered the 11-18 age range and were state maintained. The school sample is given in Table 1.

Table 1 School Sample

School	Size	Student gender	Location (i.e. catchment)	% Free School Meals
a	600	Male	Urban	Above average
b	1400	Mixed	Semi-rural	Below average
c	1200	Mixed	Rural	Average
d	1400	Mixed	Semi-rural	Below average
e	1200	Mixed	Urban	Below average
f	1400	Mixed	Semi-rural	Well below average

In this preliminary phase, all the researchers met to consider the aims and design of the project, explore initial perspectives on the conduct and constructs of the research, and to address issues of ethics and confidentiality. In addition, each teacher-researcher was interviewed to clarify initial views on the relationship between coursework and student learning.

Workshops were arranged which used synopsis of current papers in the field, brainstorming techniques and priority exercises to explore indicators and dimensions of the three qualities being observed (independent learning, critical thinking and creativity). Descriptors were identified, discussed and articulated as clear and concise statements. These statements were used to create semi-structured interview schedules to gather teachers', pupils' and parents' perceptions of the links between coursework and creative learning. The schedules were then returned to the teacher researchers for validation and comment and trialled with appropriate pupils and parents from different schools.

In-depth interviews were carried out between June 1999 and June 2000. The student interviews were drawn from a sample of Year 10 students who were entered for both GCSE English language and GCSE geography. This was a stratified random sample, based on gender and level of attainment, and comprising six students in each school. Students were interviewed twice; firstly during Year 10, and secondly, in the spring term of Year 11, just before the GCSE examinations. Parents of the students were interviewed once, by telephone. Teachers of English and geography with varying levels of experience in the case study schools were also interviewed. Data were gathered from the interviews as follows:

Table 2 Interview Sample

Interviewee	Number	Description	Interviewer
Teacher researchers	6	3 English 3 Geography	University researchers
Pupils (First interview)	36	21 male 15 female	University researchers
Pupils (Second interview)	30	17 male 13 female	University researchers
Teachers	24	12 English 12 Geography	Teacher researchers
Parents	35	12 male 23 female	University researchers
TOTAL INTERVIEWS	131		

A piece of English and geography course work from each of the students in the sample was selected for scrutiny by the team and evidence of creative learning was sought. In all the schools, coursework in geography was one or two substantial pieces of fieldwork involving data gathering from an out of school location, analysis and reporting while English coursework was a portfolio comprising essays in various forms and genres plus records of oral presentations. Each piece of work required personal investigations, analysis and presentation.

Finally, a half-day validation conference was held in the final stage of the research to which parents and the teacher-researchers and their colleagues were invited to attend along with the University-researchers (students were not invited in order to protect their anonymity). The aim of the conference was to validate, and seek to explain further, the emerging theories. The focussed discussions constituted a final round of data collection and reporting within the project itself.

The data were analysed using a mixture of conventional and electronic qualitative data analysis approaches. In addition to the framing, support, assessment and organisation of coursework; areas explored included the nature of learning, transferable skills and the three constructs: creativity, critical thinking and independent learning. Findings were not straightforward. In the next sections, outcomes relating to the descriptive responses are described, and some of the tensions that were highlighted from the continued analysis are then explored.

Perceptions Of Coursework: What Is It? Is It Any Good?

The belief that the original qualities attributed to coursework are still realised, at least to some extent, was articulated by each of the three respondent groups we interviewed. Benefits included enhancing students' communication skills, increasing their responsibility for their own work and encouraging them to generate their own ideas and initiate tasks. Coursework in both geography and English was believed to be effective in bringing about independent learning (see also Wallace, 2001). This was through:

- reflection on the task and selecting a focus for the study;
- gathering information about the topic;
- thinking about, questioning and analysing the data;
- working with others;
- organising the data into findings or arguments;
- presenting the findings;
- evaluating the product.

Most pupils described their learning from coursework in terms of three or more points from the list above; but only a few had consciously reflected on the choices at each stage. Nonetheless, all the pupils in the sample claimed some degree of independent learning as a result of their coursework. Those with a positive attitude to school (the great majority) found it motivating for the different skills that are practised and assessed through coursework tasks. There were perceptions of differences in the skills promoted by the two subject areas. It was claimed that geography coursework tended to encourage literacy, numeracy, teamwork skills, and an ability to use initiative (see Rawling, 2001). On the other hand, it was suggested that English coursework encouraged insight, originality and imagination. A view that is not new as Marshall (2001) emphasises in her recent writing.

Little dissent from the original claim (SEC, 1985) that students learn better through coursework was found. This was true for both subjects.

> *When you're doing the research for coursework you find out a lot more than you would doing homework. If for homework you're just doing a sheet saying Write out the answers to these questions, if you're really stuck you're going to look for help in books, but with coursework you're going to rely on source material and you're going to be learning a lot more from that, so you think 'That's quite interesting, I'll write about that'*
>
> (Pupil Mark)

All respondent groups explained 'learned better' in terms of retaining skills and knowledge, finding out for themselves and being motivated (see Entwistle, 1981; Gipps, 1994). Reasons for this 'deep' learning (Riding & Read, 1996) were claimed to be a result of:

- the assessment of coursework;
- coursework requiring pupils to use different techniques for gathering and organising information;
- the element of student choice.

These claims were made more generally and strongly by the students and their parents than the teachers, however. Parents stressed that coursework was challenging for their children. They believed that the responsibility for completion, the opportunity for choice and exigency of assessment, together, have the power to promote independent and creative learning. Indeed, some parents questioned whether such learning processes would have occurred without the opportunity provided by coursework. The parents, in the study, felt that teachers have a crucial role to play in challenging pupils to provoke deeper thought processes. Overall, parents considered that the teachers are successful in this. Challenging tactics, they cited, included supporting pupils to:

- decide how and where to get information,
- justify the choices they have made;
- decide how to present their information most effectively.

On balance, the pupils interviewed enjoyed coursework. Together with their parents and teachers, they valued the distinctiveness of this mode of learning and nature of the skills they acquired from it. They believed that the demands and processes of coursework enabled deeper understanding. For example,

> *...in geography you actually get out there and do it yourself. It's different to when you're actually just reading it from a book. You can actually see the changes yourself when you go out there.*
> (Pupil Erica)

In general, students were receptive to opportunities to learn more about learning - organising and managing their learning, how to become more independent - and demonstrated this in the interviews Further benefits of coursework claimed by pupils were ownership of the project and freedom to organise their own learning and modes of working. The downside was the demands of time, deadlines and the pressures from concurrent, similar work in other subjects. Although they were often given guidance on planning and using their time, pupils confessed time management still tended to be a weakness for them. A few students had considered how

coursework skills might be transferred to other subject areas or used out of school or sought by employers in the future. These included research, time management, personal organisation and the use of information technology.

> *The skills you need to use, like presentation, would be quite important in whatever you're doing outside or inside school in different subjects. Whether you word process it or do it in really neat writing. I think when you're doing research, if you know how to research properly it will be beneficial inside and outside school.*
> (Pupil Polly)

Teachers, however, were less convinced that independent learning, creativity and critical thinking occurred in the majority of cases. Remarkable instances of these qualities had undoubtedly been witnessed, but teachers felt that, in general, other constraints, such as criteria for assessment, time, and the need to achieve good grades prevented all pupils from reaching the optimum level of higher order thinking. For the best of reasons (maximising grades) teachers were often reluctant to transfer the locus of coursework control entirely to their students.

> *We have to pull in very relevant issues and provide the kids with space and opportunities to find information and some students do go away and get stuff very very easily and with some it's just not happening. So you need to make sure there are opportunities for them to do that, whether it's a computer for them or bringing something in from home.*
> (Teacher B1)

Learning From Coursework: Independent Or Directed?

Discussions with all interview groups suggested that independent learning is contingent on clear guidance from teachers to underpin student activities. It was recognised that thinking skills are not automatically developed merely by doing coursework (Foskett, 2000). Good teaching in coursework, also noted by McCallum et al. (2000) in their work with younger pupils, was described as providing a supportive structure while, at the same time, allowing the pupils to make their own decisions regarding process and content. The latter was much valued by students, but parents voiced their concern that pupils could not progress independently without fundamental and clear guidance to support their activities. Although this claim has resonance with current learning theories (Wood, 1998) and project work at all levels of learning (Heylings & Tariq, 2001), it nevertheless, highlighted a tension in that the framework of teacher guidance was seen both as a requirement for, and a detractor from, independent learning. Further complications for teachers were that the optimum level of guidance differs according to the needs of individuals, the variety of conceptions of learning

and associated differences in students' preferences and motivation for particular learning goals and ways of teaching.

Both geography and English teachers recognised the need for balance between prescriptive, directed approaches leading to routine and repetitive task completion and presentation of findings, and freedom to develop original and creative approaches and ideas. They had identified good practice for the provision of enabling strategies, frameworks and structures. These included the provision of departmental step-by-step guidance for pupils and parents and teacher availability for discussion and advice on a small group or one-to-one basis.

> *They gave us some little help sheets which don't tell you to do it all but they give you pointers, how to improve, which is useful.*
> (Pupil Polly)

Other structuring devices were lessons closely focussing on particular sections of the coursework. Teacher feedback on earlier work and drafts was also valued with pupils indicating that they learned from teachers' written comments and suggestions for improvement (see Higgins, 2000). Past projects were a good resource for pupils' information and review. Parameters for evaluation were stressed as essential in guiding pupils through this important aspect of their project. Despite recent evidence (OECD, 2001) that students in the UK are among the most able in applying critical reflection and evaluation to literacy tasks, evaluation was a skill, seen by teachers, as poorly developed in many pupils and support here was crucial in ensuring vital marks. The ideal model, similar to those elaborated by Tunstall & Gipps (1996) and Shepard (2000), showed students how to take responsibility for monitoring and judging their own efforts

Reality was that prescriptive comment was often the most efficient method of enhancing students' work. Although independent learning through coursework might decouple the outcome from a particular classroom pedagogy (e.g. enquiry learning in geography), we found little evidence of this process taking place, as in students choosing different (i.e. non-routine) ways to learn and demonstrate what was needed. Teachers acknowledged that there was an element of 'playing safe' in their support. The desired outcome of a good grade was thought to be more readily achieved through directed guidance. A free response from pupils, might be creative, but was unlikely to meet all the criteria for assessment.

Nonetheless, students constantly claimed ownership of their coursework projects. They were confident that it was, authentically, their work and all those in our interview sample were proud of their efforts - whatever the grade. Pupils believed that, although paired work and

group work were often used, they were each in control of their own learning. They stressed that as group members they contributed equally to the learning processes and to the final outcomes of the project. Girls, on average more than boys, said they talked about coursework in their friendship groups, but shared learning through pupil-pupil interactions was frequently cited by all the young people as a major benefit of coursework.

Evidence to support students' claims to independent learning were found in teachers' observations that students decide how to respond to the task, which resources to select and how to obtain information and contact appropriate people. The confidence and initiative to change plans were also seen as confirmation of independent work. Students distinguished classwork and coursework by the lack of formal teacher input in coursework sessions and teachers thought students asked more pertinent and insightful questions about coursework.

Parents indicated that, despite being very willing to help, their children did not often want to involve them in their coursework. It was evident that coursework allowed pupils to demonstrate their autonomy and to be selective in the topics they ask about and who (parent, friend or teacher) they approach for help. Some parents pointed out that support in coursework was more than advice on how to do it. Practical and organisational support, (especially, for example, in geography fieldwork) was paramount and not dependent on educational background.

There was agreement that although coursework is a greater challenge for lower ability students, it also allowed that particular group to achieve better grades in the GCSE examinations. Again, teachers had developed approaches to support lower ability students attain the highest possible marks in coursework. A universal strategy was to structure questioning very carefully in order to highlight the evidence for an argument.

> *'Have you found evidence to support or reject that hypothesis? 'Has your information confirmed what you expected? Is it true or false?' and I like to think if it's a court case I like to put them in the position of being in court and saying 'Have you proved or disproved this particular theory?' and think of it in those terms. I think they do appreciate that and understand it, although again you may get a shorter answer rather than a longer one. But at least we get them to actually question whether they've gathered enough evidence or not?*
>
> (Teacher K1)

Another tactic, also commended by Leat (1998), was holding a class discussion so that relevant arguments and theories could be shared. Several teachers felt the latter approach can be

powerful in a mixed ability group and some also stressed the value of mixing abilities for small group work.

> *I made sure that the more able were mixed in with the less able ones and I appointed a team leader for each group. I found this worked very well actually, rather than the more able pupils being brought down. I actually found they pulled the less able along.*
> (Teacher C1)

It was recognised that even although lower ability students are in possession of the required knowledge or have acquired some or all of the skills of literacy, numeracy, presentation and organisation, it is the integration of all these attributes which needs to be demonstrated. When it occurs this synthesis conveys the qualities attributed to coursework. Although stepping stones can be prepared, ultimately this synthesis can only come from the individual student. Not all pupils were able to move beyond prescriptive activities in coursework.

Creativity And Critical Thinking: Inspiration Or Imitation?

Using their own models of learning, some students were able to translate their knowledge and skills into forms of creativity and critical thinking, although usually there was no overt appreciation or recognition that they had achieved this step. The thoughts and understanding articulated by pupils about these higher order skills were, however, different according to the two subject areas. While English coursework allowed scope for demonstrating evidence of creativity, originality and imagination, geography coursework was considered more practical, with an emphasis on systematic data collection and analysis, making judgements and clear presentation. Geography coursework was distinctive in promoting skills that might be more associated with critical thinking.

Students' constructs of creative learning also differed from that of their teachers. For teachers, creativity was associated with flexibility, problem-solving and application. This was a relative view of creativity emphasising processing, organisation and elaboration of knowledge and skills. It has a parallel with innovators in the adaptor-innovator theory described by Kirton (1987). Teachers were in little doubt that it was possible to support their pupils in becoming creative learners. They articulated an ipsative view of creative learning, more akin to the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education's (NACCCE) *democratic* definition.

> *In our view, all people are capable of creative achievement in some area of activity, provided the conditions are right and they have acquired the relevant knowledge and skills.*
> (DfEE 1999: 28).

In contrast, students tended towards being adaptors with an absolute view of creativity that focused on the product, thus privileging notions of exceptionality, originality and inspiration in what it means to be creative. In their recent report, NACCCE recognised this conception of creativity as a small number of people with exceptional gifts. They defined this as an *elite* view of creativity (DfEE 1999) and pointed out that it is only one of several possible definitions.

Teachers emphasised the importance of practical advice in achieving creativity. They talked about knowing 'the rules of the game' and the techniques and strategies required for completing coursework and learning from it. For example, teachers developed schemas and opportunities for students to think about information, to ask questions, consider meaning and significance, and examine links to other information in and outside the subject. In geography, hypotheses were set up, and relevant issues explored by graphs or sketches in the classroom so that the rationale for the empirical research was well rehearsed. Feedback and comments on whole class, small group and, if possible, individual progress were offered.

Both geography and English teachers suggested that debating controversies has the potential to enhance critical thinking (see Smith, 1996; Baxter, 2000). In practice, investigations into controversial issues in geography relied on structured questioning strategies to develop critical thinking skills - geography's 'route to enquiry' (Rawling, 2000) and 'thinking through geography' approaches (Leat, 1998) exemplify this. Only a few students were able to see beyond the activity to grasp the wider opportunities expected from tasks focusing on analysis and evaluation (Halpern, 1998). One pupil explained:

> *You need to be critical of yourself and read it through and be able to see where you need to improve and you need to point out bits where you need to change it. It is about judging for yourself.*
> *I suppose in geography, before we went out to do all the work you need to think how appropriate it's going to be before you get there. Obviously it's not going to be appropriate to count traffic at every single outlet at one of the roundabouts. It just wouldn't be practical, so you have to think critically about what you're going to do before you attempt to do it.*
> (Pupil Chloe)

Although, in its original conception, coursework was intended to enhance the autonomy and capability of all pupils in all aspects of learning, our research indicated that many teachers felt that the development of techniques or skills of creativity and critical thinking is often too complex for particular pupils at age 15 or 16. Certainly, the interviews showed that many students' understanding of the concept of critical thinking was both limited and unsophisticated, focusing on criticism (often negative), being critical, and being sceptical (see

Bailin at al., 1999). Students had difficulty in shifting from the perception that questioning and evaluation was something done *to* them rather than something that should be done *by* them.

Students, working at the whole class or at the individual level, associated critical thinking with high stress situations. Teacher-student interactions that monitor the production of coursework were often seen to be situations where the 'cards are stacked' in the teacher's favour and can be perceived by students as confrontations and apparent challenges to their individuality and identity. In contrast, student-student interactions in small group work (discussing texts and media in English, carrying out fieldwork in geography), were valued by all groups as more conducive to fostering the skills of critical thinking and reflection (Morehouse, 1997).

In general, teachers' (and some parents') ideals of critical thinking as logic, explanation, rationality and controversy, in particular, political and ideological contestation, were not readily achieved by students in the execution of their GCSE coursework. Although teachers worked to encourage creative and critical skills such as questioning prior knowledge and experience, testing out and applying new knowledge, and promoting learner responsibility through reflection and evaluation, even some capable students failed to associate these skills with success in coursework.

Despite teachers' concern that coursework should, for example, demonstrate a coherent argument, students invariably believed length and presentation to be most important to the assessment criteria. Although some students acknowledged that critical and creative learning (indicated by structure, argument and understanding) would 'get them marks', only a few knew how and why to show it in their coursework, by demonstrating that they had answered the question and evaluated their own effort. Students tended to equate more effort with more writing and hence the achievement of higher grades; their view was that 'more equals better'. Students were asked how they might have improved their coursework and responses indicated that better coursework would have been more detailed, would have had more time spent on it and would be better presented in terms of spelling and grammar.

RESEARCHER: *And you didn't go a little bit further to find out how it might have been resolved or what the thinking was?*

STUDENT NA: *No, not in detail.*

RESEARCHER: *Did you have to do an evaluation?*

STUDENT NA *In all subjects, yes.*

RESEARCHER: *What sorts of things did you write about in that?*

STUDENT NA *How I could have improved it, what the problems were and whether I thought it was to my ability or not. Just a review of the whole coursework and how it went.*

RESEARCHER: *Were you making any reasoned judgements in there? I think this because..... or I think that, therefore.....?*

STUDENT NA *Only it may have been " I could have done better in this if I'd put more time into it" and "I didn't get on with this because of the time it took".*

(Pupil Nick)

The Assessment Of Coursework: Motivator Or Constraint?

The value attributed to coursework in terms of its contribution to assessment and to the learning process was a major focus for the investigation. Despite arguments that an authentic form of assessment such as coursework gives pupils the chance to demonstrate what they do know rather than test what they do not know (Gipps,1994), teachers thought their ideals of supporting creative learning were often limited in practice by the assessment framework emphasis on raising attainment and accountability.

While it was clear the pupils were motivated by coursework, part of this motivation is related to the grade received at the end of the work. Just how much of the motivation could be attributed to extrinsic gains was difficult to measure. A predominant view expressed by pupils was that coursework is a 'good thing' because it takes pressure of the formal examination. It was argued that pupils do not always perform very well in formal examination conditions and that coursework, therefore, presents a clearer and more truthful picture of ability. A view also supported in the research of Smith (1996) and not exclusive to the lower attaining group. Coursework provides a buffer against the traditional exam and reduces exam stress although coursework, itself, is not stress free (see Denscombe 2000).

In discussing the allocation of marks to a piece of coursework, a few teachers gave the assessment scheme to their students. Where this had been clearly and firmly explicated, students were often able to work out what is significant in terms of marks. The question of allowing redrafts for improvement in some coursework projects led to a tension about whether this was part of the learning process, or whether it merely led to less differentiation.

X has been given his to do again, to make his mark better. So my opinion of that is 'Why do it in the first place? ' If you do it once, to me they should put their all into it and shouldn't be given a second chance. If they're doing that instead of being part of the final exam, the final exam you don't get a second chance. I don't understand why they give them a second chance in the coursework.
(Parent 1)

Students told us that they recognised the assessed product did not represent all of their learning; in other words there was little accreditation for the processes involved in doing the coursework, only for the product. Exceptionally, more experienced teachers and a minority of students recognised that neither teachers nor students were compelled to follow particular coursework practices. This was despite the claims about conflicts between managerial and accountability agendas and the forces of professional practices which influenced the majority of teachers' approaches. However, in order to have access to higher grades, most teachers now tend to coach students in specific techniques and look for evidence of these in their assessments. There can be no doubt that in a potential conflict between grades and independent learning, a higher grade would be preferred by students, teachers and parents.

Conclusions

One of the purposes of introducing coursework was to promote and give value to the 'softer' less tangible transferable skills such as critical thinking, creativity and independent learning. It is clear that these skills are valued and recognised by teachers, parents and students and that they think that coursework has an important role in giving students an opportunity to develop and demonstrate them. Students and parents agreed that a significant outcome from coursework was students' improved ability to initiate tasks and assume responsibility for their own work. This independence, in turn, engendered motivation for learning and positive feelings about the value of the different skills practised and assessed through coursework.

However, teachers thought that most students do not achieve their potential in coursework. Overall, they believed that, with teacher support, low ability students can be helped to achieve more. In contrast, high ability students may produce excellent work but still can be limited by ceilings imposed by the criteria for assessment or the ways teachers interpret them. In coursework students engage in a hybrid learning experience in which autonomy in the organisation of the individual learning process is mediated and constricted by teachers and their interpretations of a heavily prescribed coursework and assessment framework. With the exception of confident, high ability students the locus of control for carrying out coursework still lies largely with teachers.

It was evident that transferable skills have a role in *producing* good quality coursework. However, evidence from all three groups clearly indicated that such *process skills* are of secondary importance to the goal of achieving a GCSE grade for coursework. Getting 'marks in the bank' (students), constraints from assessment criteria (teachers), pressure from accountability procedures (teachers) all promoted the importance of maximising students' grades. Increasingly such high stakes factors influenced the practice of completing coursework (students completing, teachers structuring and supporting, parents having expectations) to the extent where the promotion of critical thinking, creativity and independent learning is of a second order and importance. Whilst the *status quo* is not likely to change in the short term, our study suggests that it is appropriate to consider redressing the balance so that greater attention is given to the *process* of coursework not only as an end in itself but also in enhancing the *product.*

At the end of the day, assessment drives the learning process and over-rides practically every other aspect of curriculum, learning and teaching. Teachers assume that students will perceive the demands of learning and assessment in the same way that they do. In fact, despite teachers' assertions that marking schemes have been shared with students, the students tend not to understand what the assessment criteria actually require from them (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Our research suggested that it is not sufficient to tell them; illustrations, examples and models are required.

Students' learning and achievements in coursework would benefit from a wider recognition and (consequent) focus on what constitutes success. Perhaps the greatest challenge is that assessment also needs to incorporate greater diversity in due recognition of a wider conception of intelligence and achievement. Assessment has a clear influence on the extent to which the education system can develop skills of independent and creative learning. Whilst ability is increasingly becoming recognised as multi-dimensional (Gardner, 1993), assessment has not moved in a similar vein and continues to traditionally favour the linguistic and mathematical based skills.

Findings from the research suggest that students' learning would be enhanced (and the completion of coursework facilitated) from a more focused approach with emphasis on either the generic skills associated with coursework and (or) an inter-subject, rather than intra-subject approach. Too often coursework in different subject areas demand the same generic skills. A consensus on the purpose of coursework would be helpful. If it is to accumulate 'marks in the bank' for each subject then the present approach is likely to be effective. If it is to

give value to transferable skills such as creativity, critical thinking and independent learning, a coherent inter-subject approach would support and develop these process skills efficiently and effectively.

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PERSONAL LEARNING PLANNING:
CAN TUTORING IMPROVE PUPILS' LEARNING?

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Summary

This article explores the impact of a Personal Learning Planning (PLP) initiative on pupils' understanding of, and confidence in, learning. The cornerstone of the initiative was a one-to-one, or small group, discussion between Year 9 students and their class tutor. This resulted in written personal learning plan. The benefits and weaknesses of the initiative are discussed and the inter-relationships between action planning, one-to-one tutoring and learning are explored.

Key Words: Tutoring; Learning; Action Planning

Introduction

Whatever your age and experience, learning is a complex process. Despite being the core business of schools and the focus of innumerable research investigations, understanding of how to learn is rarely considered or discussed to any great effect in classrooms, playgrounds or even staff rooms (Leat, 1999). The precept that the key to the quality of learning in schools rests, primarily, on sound quantitative measures of their procedures and outcomes (Fitz-gibbon, 1993; MacPherson, 1993; Schagen, 1995) still largely dictates the day-to-day organisation of school and the delivery of teaching. Alternative views that to succeed within the complexities of the 21st century (Kumar, 1997; Handy, 1997; James & Gipps, 1998), learners need to be self aware, confident and flexible are more often found in print than in practice.

For some time research has suggested that learning in school can be aided by individual or small group review and discussion between students and their tutor (Broadfoot, 1988; Watts, 1994; Waterhouse, 1991; Lodge, 2000). Projects such as flexible learning, personal development planning and individual career planning have both flourished and floundered;

usually dependent on government policy or sources of funding rather than an unbiased judgement about their impact on learning.

Our recent evaluation of an initiative that placed dialogue between tutors and their pupils at the heart of the learning process indicated that there was much to be gained from such activities, but that a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the processes and interactions was necessary for a lasting impact. Called Personal Learning Planning (PLP), the initiative set out to enhance pupils' understanding of, and confidence in, their learning in Year 9. This article aims to share some of the findings from this evaluation.

The Initiative

Personal Learning Planning (PLP) is both a process and a product. The process supports pupils' learning through one-to-one or small group discussions between pupils and their tutor. These discussions reflect on current achievement and the identification and articulation of the pupil's own goals for improvement; while the product is an action plan, normally written by the pupil, which sets out clear targets together with appropriate actions and times to achieve them by. One aim of the project was to embed good understanding of, and habits about, learning which would support students in the latter years of secondary school and into further or higher education and beyond. . Specific objectives of PLP were to:

- motivate and increase self confidence by involving students in planing their own learning and personal development;
- ensure that students regularly reviewed progress and set learning and other targets with tutors;
- support increased academic performance;
- develop communication, negotiation and planning skills in students.

The Evaluation

We were invited to act as external evaluators to the PLP project in May 1996. Twenty-six mainstream schools were involved in all aspects of the evaluation. The purpose of the evaluation was both formative, guiding the development of the initiative by identifying noteworthy practice and areas of strengths and weaknesses; and summative, investigating the quality, impact and additionality of PLPs. We therefore used a range of data collecting techniques to gather evidence on the effectiveness of PLP in meeting its own objectives, set out above. These techniques included:

- two semi-structured interviews with the identified PLP co-ordinator in each school, carried out at the beginning and 12 months into the project;
- two sets of focused group activities that included tutors and representatives from the schools' senior management teams;

- case studies in six mainstream schools with different characteristics and styles of using PLP. These included interviews with Year 9 and Year 11 students (aged 15-16 years and in the last year of compulsory schooling) and a group of tutors with experience of PLP;
- an attitude survey from a sample of two tutor groups from each school who were in Year 9 during 1996/97 and carried out at four stages between Year 9 and Year 11.

Findings from the Evaluation

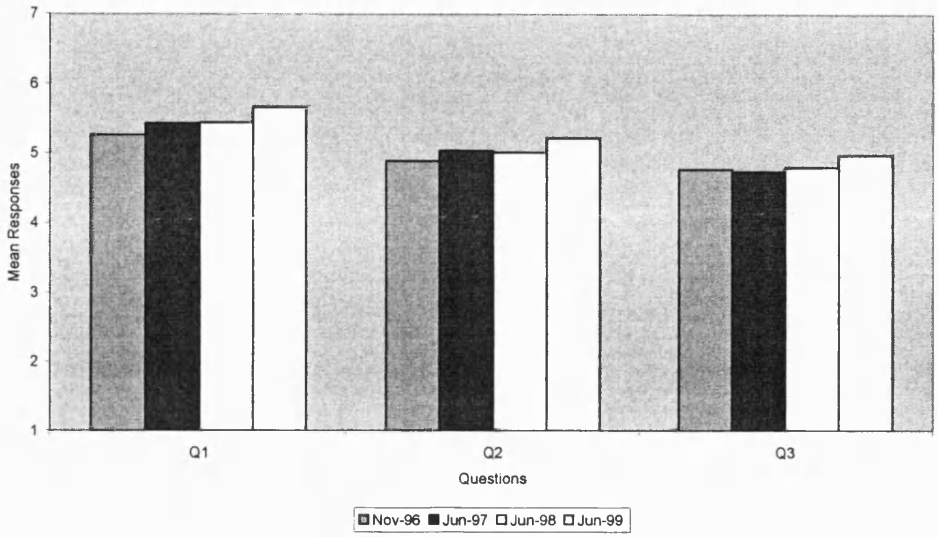
Scrutiny of the attitude surveys indicated that there were changes in students' responses to constructs related to PLP that were not wholly explained by maturing or school organisation and timetabling. These changes were further explored through the qualitative data to clarify the nature of any impact from the tutor- student dialogues in Year 9. There was clear consensus that PLP was effective in enhancing student awareness and capability in areas that required explicit transmission of information such as making choices about options and future courses and using the careers library. The one-to-one dialogue was also thought to have benefits for developing communication skills and confidence in talking to people. Attitude changes were especially evident with boys and are discussed in more detail below.

However, when we came to examine the outcomes of PLP in areas that were most closely related to learning we realised that while some success could be claimed, the effects were not unequivocal and a detailed scrutiny of both qualitative and quantitative results was required to understand the subtle differences in the nature of the most effective and least effective outcomes.

Personal Understanding

A conviction of those leading the PLP project was that pupils' understanding of their own skills and abilities and their knowledge of strategies for improving these skills and abilities were fundamental in supporting and sustaining learning (see also Main, 1980; McGuiness, 1989; Squirrell, 1995). Enhancement of pupils' personal understanding was, therefore, a clearly stated aim of PLP. Figure 1 shows the students' responses over the four data collections to the questions relating to Personal understanding.

Figure 1
Mean Responses to Items Relating to Personal Understanding



Q1 *How well do you think you know your own skills and abilities?*

Q2 *How well do you know what to do to improve your skills and abilities*

Q3 *How clear are you about how well your teachers think you are doing in lessons?*

Questions 1 and 2 in the attitude survey showed that, over the PLP period in Year 9, there was a positive change in pupils' attitudes concerned with personal understanding of their own skills and abilities which could be attributed to the discussion with their tutor. When this change was probed at interview, it was clear that pupils felt encouraged that their tutors had time to sit down and chat with them, individually, about their wider interests. Many pupils came away with the feeling that their tutors genuinely wanted to help them, and for some this was a novel idea (Howieson & Semple, 1998). Pupils had benefited from the opportunity to talk about themselves, what they were good at and what they found difficult. They had also been encouraged to think about strategies for improving their skills in and out of school. The student interviews looking back over PLP with hind sight from Year 11 indicated that this was often the first experience of systematically planning their learning but for many of those interviewed the realisation of the importance of this only crystallised some time after the event.

At first glance, responses to question 3 which asked, *How clear are you about how well tutors think you are doing in lessons?*, were disappointing. Closer investigation revealed that the fluctuation was wholly a function of girls' attitudes. Boys, in fact, grew progressively clearer about their teachers' opinions of their efforts (Table I).

Table I
Q3 responses by gender

	SURVEY	ALL	FEMALE	MALE
3. *How clear are you about how well your teachers think you are doing in lessons?*	1	4.77	4.81	4.73
	2	4.74	4.68	4.80
	3	4.8	4.73	4.87
	4	4.97	4.98	4.95

This was representative of a number of questions indicating that boys benefitted more consistently than girls from the one-to-one discussion with their tutor. Tutors suggested that this is partly a function of the earlier maturing and skills of reflection in adolescent girls. At age thirteen, boys began PLP with less thought about analysing and planning their lives and the impact of the one-to-one conversation with a tutor may, therefore, be more significant. Other data supported the view that girls, more than boys, are already likely to talk to adults and peers about personal matters. The requirement for a PLP dialogue and its associated personal reflection may contribute to the raising of boys' skills and confidence when thinking and talking about their own strengths and weaknesses.

This still fails to explain girls' decrease in understanding, over the PLP year, about how well teachers think they are doing. One rationalisation is that girls are already skilled and confident enough to initiate and manipulate conversations with a tutor to obtain the information they require. Consequently, their initial expectations of an individual tutorial session may have been higher. The structured PLP process helped them to articulate their own understanding of themselves and their learning, but failed to give them any reciprocal insights into the thinking of their tutors.

This idea was reinforced by the interviews with tutors who described how PLP had enabled them to develop greater understanding both of their tutees and their own classroom practice. For tutors, particular benefits of the PLP interview were that they distinguished the relatively quiet group of average attainers, provided quicker support strategies for those who were struggling, and made identification of specific needs easier.

'You don't know them very well until one-to-one.'

'It's allowed me to reflect on how students learn.'

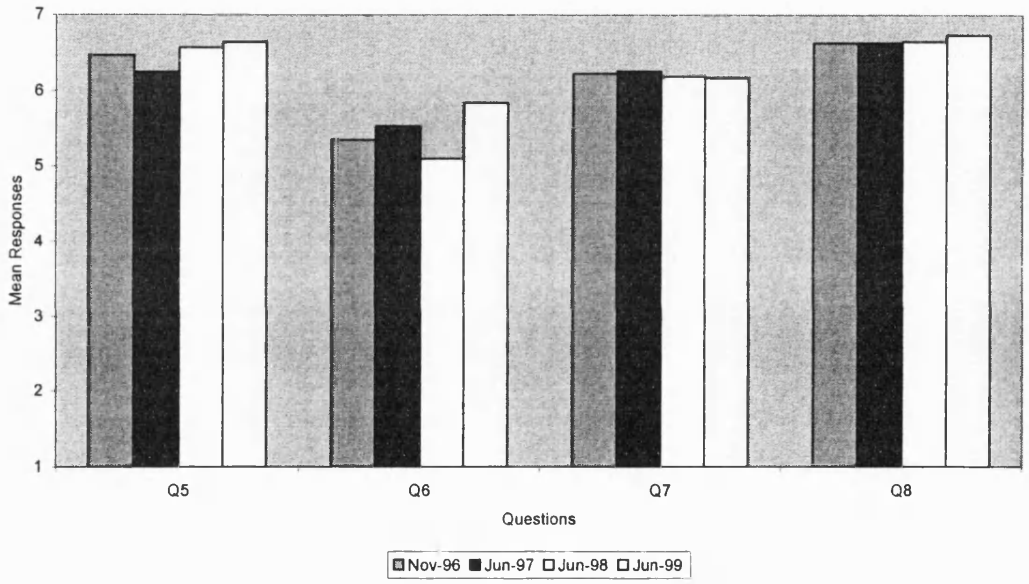
Although for tutors, PLP was an opportunity to interact with, and learn about, their pupils at a more informal level, the perceptions of some pupils was that the initiative was a school procedure set up to facilitate option choices leading into GCSE. While the dialogue had undoubtedly nurtured positive relationships between staff and students, girls, in particular, might have welcomed some greater sharing of purpose and perceptions from it. There is clearly much of

benefit in tutor-student dialogues. They are enjoyable, informative and boost student personal understanding to some extent. A shift to a more sharing exchange of ideas with the tutor offering aspects of their experiences and thinking might prompt even greater learning benefits for both student and tutor (see also Rudduck, 1995).

Motivation

The links between motivation and effective learning have been long established (Hargreaves et al., 1982; Jonassen & Grabowski, 1993; Abbott, 1994). The responses relating to motivation were markedly positive for both males and females, but appeared to be largely independent of PLP with variations explained by factors such as timing and stage of school. See Figure 2.

Figure 2
Mean Responses to Items Relating to Motivation



Q5 *How important is it for you to do well at school this year?*

Q6 *Overall, how interesting do you think you will find your courses next year?*

Q7 *How hard are you prepared to work to do well at school?*

Q8 *How keen are you to do well in your future career?*

It appears that pupils in Year 9, 10 and 11 are very keen to do well. On the 7-point scale in the attitude questionnaire, the question, *'How hard are you prepared to work to do well at school?'* consistently averaged around 6.2 and reached a peak after the one-to-one discussions in Year 9. As shown above, other items in this cluster were also highly positive, with question 5 and 8 scoring around 6.5 and 6.6, respectively, in all data collections. Responses to question 6, *How*

much are you looking forward to your studies next year? fluctuated according to the stage of school and were more positive before a course change.

As approximately 1,000 representative students from 26 different schools responded to each questionnaire, there can be little doubt that the intentions of the vast majority of pupils are to do well at school. It is obvious, however, that motivation alone is not sufficient to guarantee achievement. While the PLP process of enabling students to learn how to plan for the future can claim some success, pupils did not recognise that the development of skills in identifying and setting targets for individual improvement was only the foundation for translating the intention into the appropriate activity.

Although mean responses to the question, *How easy is it to set yourself targets to work towards?*, fluctuated over the four data collections, mean responses to the question, *How often do you achieve the targets you have set?* dropped successively in Years 9 and 10 but revived in Year 11. This suggests that examinations rather than individual discussions with their tutor are having the real impact on stimulating students to achieve their goals.

It seems likely, however, that the benefits of learning how to set useful, specific and realistic targets with PLP observed in Year 9 are being consolidated at the crucial stage of GCSE preparation. As we pointed out above, PLP had a clear positive effect on pupils' knowledge about how and where to get information to help them with their future planning. When interviewed, tutors agreed that as a result of PLP more Year 9 pupils had given thought to their future, where they wanted to be and how they could get there, than previously was the case. This was also an aspect that the students, interviewed in year 11, remembered very clearly and for many this reflection on their choices for the future was the dominant impact of their PLP experience.

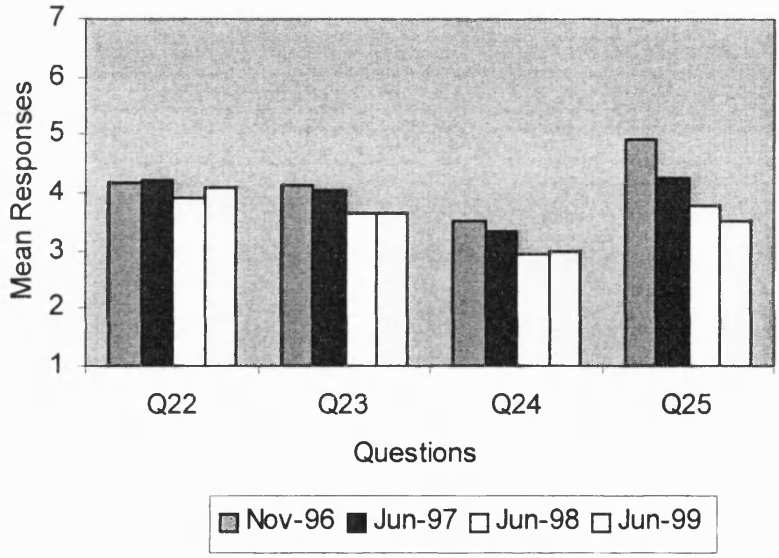
There is a difference between the intentions of setting targets and the reality of achieving them, and some students found it difficult to convert the resolution into appropriate action. In the frame of lifelong learning, confidence in identifying, setting and achieving their own targets is likely to be a powerful learning tactic. However, pupils need to accept and understand this as a strategy for learning. They need to know that an effective action planning cycle does not stop when plans are written and targets are set. Learners need encouragement and interest at each stage of the cycle and PLP processes must include systems for ensuring this. One of the issues arising from the tutor interviews was the lack of opportunity to revisit targets and help students move on. In the main, systems for linking the tutor-guided action plan into the subject areas were not in place. In secondary schools, the tutor is only one of many teachers working with an

individual student and may not be the person most suited to supporting achievement of the target.

Attitude To Learning

A fundamental aim of PLP was to establish good habits and attitudes that would support lifelong learning, and a major focus of the evaluation was to investigate the reality and extent of this. There was, therefore, disappointment that the responses to the attitude questionnaire suggested most students had not grasped the wider implications of PLP for learning about learning.. See Figure 3.

Figure 3
Mean Responses to Items Relating to Learning



Q22 *How clear are you about how you might use your record of personal ideas and targets?*

Q23 *How much has your personal learning plan helped you to achieve something better at school?*

Q24 *How much has your personal learning plan helped you with your life outside school?*

Q25 *How much do you think that your personal learning plan will help you after you leave school?*

While it was clear that pupils were becoming more confident in some skills, understanding and attitudes, and had begun to understand how they might use their action plan, few were at this point, able to appreciate the potential, wider outcomes of PLP for meta-cognition and lifelong learning. Although questions relating to motivation scored consistently highly with respondents claiming, almost without exception, high lifelong ambitions, and while skills of planning and

target setting had improved, any eagerness for PLP as a general procedure for learning and improvement was simultaneously waning. Students had not recognised the incremental and cyclical nature of the planning process that could underpin learning and lead to lifelong achievement. Questions probing students' continued use of the PLP cycle illustrated that most students were unlikely to return to the PLP process in subsequent school years nor in the future. Typical student comments included:

Hard to discuss your future when it's so far away.
May help later in life but I'm not yet sure how.

Some explanations for this observation have already been explored in this paper. Comparison of the mean scores to questions 23, 24 and 25 supported the view that pupils tended to see the dialogue and subsequent plan as a school directed activity to help plan their option choices and future careers, rather than an aid to their own immediate academic and personal development. Integration of careers planning and personal learning planning should not necessarily be a weakness, however. Ultimately, one of the driving motivations to do well at school is the promise of success in the future, but the links between planning immediate learning steps and achievement in the future need to be explicit.

Nor, perhaps, had all tutors explicitly focused on the idea that the dialogue was about individual learning or discussed with their students simple strategies for effective learning. As one student observed:

Although you talk to your tutor about what you want to do,
there's not a lot of guidance about how to achieve it.

It may be that these links need to be more clearly set out by tutors in one-to-one sessions, or explored in preliminary group-work. This aspect of the dialogue may need to involve some analysis of the nature of a particular task or clarification of what constitutes criteria for success. Teachers and PLP tutors may also need to build on the undoubted long-term motivation of pupils by emphasising the links between present good practice and future success. These were areas which many schools in this study had identified as important and were currently grappling.

Further investigation into responses by gender showed that the increasingly negative attitudes to learning were heavily weighted by the girls' responses. Initially, boys demonstrated greater negativity to the prospect of PLP, but were more positive than the girls after experiencing the reality of the initiative (Table II).

Table II
Responses to Learning by Gender

	SURVEY	ALL	FEMALE	MALE
23 *How much has your personal learning plan helped you to achieve something better at school?*	1	4.14	4.15	4.13
	2	4.03	3.99	4.08
	3	3.65	3.6	3.7
	4	3.64	3.54	3.75
24 *How much has your personal learning plan helped you with your life outside school?*	1	3.53	3.60	3.46
	2	3.33	3.26	3.40
	3	2.95	2.91	3
	4	2.98	2.92	3.05
25 *How much do you think that your personal learning plan will help you after you leave school?*	1	4.91	4.93	4.89
	2	4.27	4.20	4.35
	3	3.8	3.75	3.84
	4	3.51	3.4	3.61

Students were asked to predict their possible level of achievement in their GCSE examinations and this was used as a rough measure of ability. When attitudinal responses were investigated by ability it was shown that, in contrast to the responses to most of the other questions, the lower attaining group tended to respond more positively than the higher attainers to the attitude questions relating to lifelong learning (Table III).

Table III
Responses to Learning by Attainment

	SURVEY	ALL	LOW	HIGH
23 *How much has your personal learning plan helped you to achieve something better at school?*	1	4.14	4.18	4.08
	2	4.00	4.06	3.97
	3	3.63	3.92	3.38
	4	3.64	4.04	3.33
24 *How much has your personal learning plan helped you with your life outside school?*	1	3.5	3.66	3.4
	2	3.3	3.41	3.24
	3	2.91	3.33	2.56
	4	2.99	3.52	2.58
25 *How much do you think that your personal learning plan will help you after you leave school?*	1	4.9	4.89	4.91
	2	4.26	4.21	4.3
	3	3.78	4.07	3.55
	4	3.51	4.02	3.11

This supports the premise that lower ability pupils benefit relatively more than higher attaining pupils from talking about their learning with a supportive adult. More able students may not

need such one-to-one discussions with a tutor to help them formulate and achieve their learning plans in and out of school.

The attainment groups were subdivided by gender and the comparative patterns between the attitudes of the four groups scrutinised. This analysis again indicated that the effectiveness of PLP in improving achievement in school is greater with lower ability pupils and especially with low ability boys. This trend is also true for achievement outside school, clarity of career choice after school and awareness of how to use the PLP.

Discussion

This evaluation indicated that although the PLP processes and product were successful in enhancing pupils' confidence in some fundamental skills, understandings and attitudes, not many students were, at this point, able to appreciate the potential, wider outcomes of PLP for learning about their own learning. The various facets of the data gathering and analysis emphasised that few students perceived learning as a skill which can be understood, learnt and improved. Most students continued to see learning as a particular task for completion and PLP as a school-oriented routine to help them make career and course choices.

The evidence pointed to specific gaps between the rhetoric and the reality of teachers' and pupils' beliefs and practices that contributed to the lack of understanding about learning. Such gaps in perceptions have been recorded in other studies (see Morgan & Morris, 1999). While both parties appeared to appreciate and enjoy the dialogue, it seems that both failed to make the most of the process. Pupils were not able to make the links underpinning learning. In order to understand the nature of learning, students need to be helped to recognise the links between their learning of facts, theories and skills, their learning of the processes of learning, and their learning about themselves both as learners and people. All these co-evolve and depend on each other for strength and support. If one is reduced, the whole may be limited.

The interviews enabled tutors to discover interesting facts about their pupils but, in general, they too missed the opportunity to explore the dynamics of individual pupil learning. Only a few had shared their own thoughts and experiences or sought students' views on their learning processes. Students would benefit from the confidence of knowing that they possess useful information for tutors. A one-to-one discussion with students is clearly a learning opportunity for teachers, as well as students, and needs to be heralded as such. The fundamental notion of how teachers and students communicate about learning could well be a focus for staff discussion and professional development.

The evaluation made clear that the great majority of students are well motivated by the desire to succeed at school and in their careers. However, most were not able to, or did not know how to, turn this motivation into action. This was also emphasised by the gap between the ability to set targets and the ability to achieve them. The relationship between tutor and pupil is clearly a crucial factor in effective learning. The tutor, however, is only one of many subject teachers and the PLP dialogue only the first step to improved learning in school. Simple strategies for sharing information arising from PLP and monitoring the targets set, need to be considered by schools in order to develop this link with effective learning. To be really effective, outcomes from action planning initiatives need to be seen as a starting point not as the completion.

In this study, the practice of target setting that has been at the heart of much UK government policy making in recent years (Ofsted, 1996), appeared to encourage the misconception that setting targets is equivalent to learning. This research indicated that this is not the case. Students regard a target as a task for completion and may or may not achieve it; and may or may not learn from it. In general terms, students have not yet considered the nature of learning nor identified the learning skills that could be practised, and they did not understand that learning is both active and reflective. It has been noted elsewhere that this belief is often strengthened by the culture of the school (see Sternberg, 1989) and the culture of target setting may well contribute here.

The finding, that PLP is likely to have most sustained effect with lower ability pupils and especially boys has important implications in the light of current government policy of identifying and aiming resources at those who need extra help to reach their potential (Department for Education and Employment, 2000). In systems with scarce resources, there is always a dilemma about equity versus need. Practice is now tending towards need rather than equity. The evidence gathered in this study suggested that needs would not have been well met without the prerequisite of equity. The embedding of the PLP activity within the systems of the school allowed it to be accepted as the norm, and as an entitlement for all pupils, and so raised its status. Activities which afford special attention to the needs of a few have the possibility of either being rejected with embarrassment, or being hijacked and adapted by those with the confidence and ability to desire, and to understand, the longer term benefits of them.

Although some schools were more successful than others in supporting learning within PLP, it was only where PLP was recognised and explicitly acknowledged throughout the whole school as a learning initiative that students began to understand the wider implications of the activities. Such a common and clear understanding is vital if the skills of information processing and organisation of learning that support long term learning are to be valued by teachers and understood by students. Discussion between teachers and individual students about ways in

which learners can be helped to understand the nature of knowledge and learning, and encouraged how to think rather than taught what to think is essential. Hitherto, this has been well examined in whole class and even small group scenarios, but less so in a one-to-one situation.

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PARTNERS IN LEARNING OR MONITORS FOR ATTENDANCE?
VIEWS ON PERSONAL TUTORIALS FROM FURTHER EDUCATION

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BACKGROUND

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, there is an undeniable consensus about the desirability of marketable qualifications and training that are underpinned by a continued, flexible approach to learning (DfES, 2001; DfEE, 1999). In the UK, further education colleges have responded to this accord by expanding student numbers and tailoring courses to suit all comers. Accompanying these developments have been requirements for greater accountability with associated transparency in the form (for example) of published examination results and attendance records and systematic, external inspections. These scrutinies, however, have indicated that a sizeable proportion (15%) of further education students do not complete their courses while around 26% fail to achieve their qualification aims (National Audit Office, 2001; Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2001).

As programme innovations and quality assurance schemes evolve and embed, and as issues of achievement and retention become ever more pressing, college lecturers and managers have been drawn towards an individualised approach to student support and learning. Accordingly, tutor time and resources have been allocated to providing a personal tutorial entitlement for students that includes one-to-one discussions with an informed adult in order to guide, support and manage their individual learning.

In a recent study Martinez (2001a) found that, from 80 self-selected 'improving' colleges, over half (58%) had worked on tutoring issues as part of their improvement policy. Indeed, improving the tutorial system was the most widely reported strategy by the participants, and one officially 'improving college' for over 5 years, cited the decision to introduce a new tutorial system as an important reason for their ability to sustain their achievements (Martinez, 2001a). Similarly Davies (2001), comparing colleges in similar areas and with students from similar backgrounds, claimed that tutorials were a very important feature of the institutions which 'make a difference':

> *There was widespread recognition of the central contribution that tutorial systems could make to improving and sustaining student retention and achievement. Tutors were seen as a vital personal link with individual students, able to keep a regular check on their academic progress and personal circumstances, and to help ensure that any problems were confronted and dealt with should they arise.* (Davies, 2001: 34).

However, while excellent practice in tutorial programmes as described by Davies (2001) indubitably exists, practices and cultures in post-compulsory colleges remain diverse and heterogeneous (Simkins & Lumby, 2002). An understanding of the role of the personal tutor in the processes of developing students' achievements and learning is yet to be fully explicated and shared.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This paper derives from a small investigation that was commissioned by, and carried out in, one general post-compulsory College. The College was an institution of further and higher education, serving a rapidly expanding town some 70 miles from London. It provided learning opportunities for around 20,000 students aged from 16 to over 70. The College was founded on a spirit of diversity and a commitment to respond to local needs. In its promotional material, the College claimed:

> *We are large enough to offer a full range of courses and facilities and small enough to care about individual students.*

The tutorial programme was an entitlement for all students at the College. Arrangements varied between faculties and departments, but in general, all full-time students had an allocated personal tutor, with tutorials on a group or an individual basis time-tabled for one hour each week. Most tutors had between ten and twenty students in their personal tutor group, but there were some with larger or smaller groups.

The aims of the study were to explore the nature and effectiveness of the tutorial experience in the eyes of both students and tutors. Responding to the particular needs of the College, the study focussed, in the main, on the experiences of students working towards level two qualifications, and their personal tutors. Particular focuses for investigation included:

- Perceptions of the tutorial provision;
- Expectations of the purpose, content, quality and delivery of the tutorial programme;
- Implications for students and their learning;
- Implications for staff and for their learning and teaching; and,

- Issues of practicality related to time-tabling, resources etc.

In addition, the study was designed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the tutorial provision and to illuminate the perceived impact of the different aspects of the tutorial programme on student well-being, achievement and retention.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to maximise breadth and depth of information, the research design used both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection (Harland, 1996; Denscombe, 1998). Data were gathered from tutors and students in three of the faculties in the College. Courses in these faculties could be full-time or part-time and met a wide range of individual student needs for academic and vocational qualifications and general education and life skills.

The study began with a scrutiny of appropriate literature in the public domain. Relevant documentation from the College was also obtained. This included tutor handbooks, tutor notes, monitoring data and tutorial record proformas.

Preliminary, in-depth discussion about the tutorial system at the College took place with senior and middle managers from the College. This discussion, together with the background reading, informed a questionnaire for tutors. This instrument sought to establish the views of staff about the nature and purpose of the tutorial programme, and in particular, the one-to-one sessions. It aimed to derive a base-line of data providing details of actual practice and succinct answers to questions such as 'how are tutorial sessions organised?', and 'why are one-to-one tutorials taking place?' Before use, the questionnaire was scrutinised by representatives of the user group to enhance validity. The questionnaires were distributed, through the College internal post, to all full-time lecturing staff (about 170 individuals).

In order to allow the complexity of the tutorial system to be fully explored and the responses of key groups clarified, in-depth data were then collected by semi-structured interviews with both students and tutors. The interview schedules were informed by the on-going research. Before use, they were scrutinised by stakeholders in order to ensure validity.

Those interviewed were selected to represent the key stakeholder groups within the College. Students were interviewed first, in small groups of four or five. Each interview lasted approximately forty minutes. Tutors were then interviewed individually, with each interview lasting between forty and sixty minutes. Samples were drawn from:

- tutors of level two students and senior tutors in each of the three faculties;

- their current and (if possible) former students;
- middle managers with direct responsibility for the tutorial programme; and,
- senior managers with responsibility for policy decisions.

Analysis of the data sought to present both students' and tutors' experiences, perceptions and expectations of the tutorial system, and to theorise these in the overall context and realities of the College and similar institutions. The findings related respondents' perceptions of the tutorial provision to its impact on student well-being and learning. Examples of good practice and concerns were captured and strategies for future priorities relating to tutorial provision formulated and rationalised. First, each aspect of the research was analysed separately to explore the particular issues arising from that source. Secondly, general theories and critical judgements about the purpose, content, quality and delivery of current tutorial provision at the College were developed by scrutiny of all the data sources. Outcomes from the study were intended to inform decision-making and the setting of priorities in the area of tutorial provision within the College.

The findings that are presented here draw on the interview data to illuminate, compare and contrast particular views of students and their tutors in relation to the purpose, worth and organisation of personal tutorials. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of effective tutorial practices in colleges of further education. A future paper will explore the management implications of tutorial provision within colleges of further education.

FINDINGS

In general terms, both students and tutors enjoyed and valued the tutorial provision. Students highly valued the one-to-one meetings that allowed them to talk personally with their tutor. Most student respondents were keen to emphasise the positive and supportive relationships that they had with their personal tutors. Tutors were seen as approachable and empathetic in their dealings with students. College tutorials were perceived as different from those experienced at school, and this was something that was welcomed by students.

> *Student: They treat you more like an adult than a child. It's much easier and they give you a fair amount of time.*

Negative comment from students tended to centre on the practical organisation of tutorials rather than the quality of communication and support for learning. The need for clear information about realistic expectations and entitlement from the tutorial system was

constantly implied. Although a student handbook was provided, there was little in it about the role of the personal tutor.

> *Student 1: We knew we were going to have personal tutors.*
> *Student 2: But they didn't exactly tell us what the tutor is going to be doing.*
> *Student 3: You don't really know what to expect. It's just like starting a new school.*

From their perspective, staff strongly believed that tutorial work had a positive impact on the learning of their students, although this had not always been rationalised. There was also an acknowledgement of the importance of the personal tutorial system in lowering student attrition rates within the College. However, despite evidence, from some departments, of effective attempts to reflect upon the tutorial experience and to share good practice, the mechanisms that enhanced attainment and retention were not universally shared. While guidelines for the tutorial programme had been produced for tutors within the College, the data suggested that not all tutors were aware of the existence and the content of this document.

Format and style of tutorials

Within this one institution, differences in the content and style of tutorial activities were clear. Most tutors claimed to deliver a mixture of whole group sessions and one-to-one interviews. The balance between one-to-one and whole group activities was largely determined by the perceived needs of the students from the tutor's own observations or from information from a colleague. It was also fashioned by tutors' views on the aims and objectives of the tutorial programme. As tutors showed disparate understanding of the aims, nature and structure of the tutorial programme, this led to some inconsistency of provision. Students experienced a range of formats for their timetabled, tutorial slots. These ranged from no structured or organised activities with one-to-one sessions arranged if and when necessary, to clearly structured activities related to assessed subject work and one-to-one tutorials by rotation with additional one-to-one slots if required.

Most students were invited by their tutors to meet on a one-to-one basis about once each half term, or more frequently if the need arose. On the other hand, we spoke to some full-time students who never had a one-to-one discussion with their tutor even at the final weeks of the academic year. Tutors stressed that students were able to request a one-to-one discussion, but from the student perspective, this was rare.

Students also valued their meetings as a whole tutorial group. There was a feeling that some things were better discussed in groups and, also, that group meetings were good for making friends and providing a social base. Again, the structures of the whole group sessions varied with students telling of a variety of experiences. For some, group tutorial time meant engaging with general issues within a tutorial 'curriculum' devised centrally by the College. The emphasis in these tutorial sessions was on issues such as careers, drugs education, finance and the like. Others spent their tutorial sessions working on material associated with the College courses they were following. A final group of respondents appeared to be largely left to their own devices within the timetabled tutorial meetings.

Group and one-to-one meetings were thought to complement each other and both were felt to be needed by students. The students stressed that the best groups should not be too large with around 12 to 15 cited as appropriate. It was noted by tutors that the size of the tutor group varied greatly between courses and departments and that this could have an impact on the student-tutor relationship. The few students who had no structured activities in their tutorial sessions perceived their group as no more than a forum for receiving notices.

Tutors believed that students (whatever their age or area of study) preferred clear structure. However, all agreed that a good tutorial programme needed to be flexible and adaptable to individual student needs and the various pressures within the academic year. Students also argued that tutorials should have different structures and foci at different times of the year. They suggested a variety in topics covered and a gradation in time allocation and in the balance between group and one-to-one. Students felt that the format of the tutorials needed to be flexible to take account of the differing demands on students through the year.

> *Student: Middle of the year need tutorials to sort out work demands. Also at the beginning of the year when you start off doing your course, so you can tell him if you're enjoying the course, if there are bits you're finding difficult, if you find a bit that you don't actually want to be doing. You could actually use that time to sort it out first thing in the year*

Students suggested that an effective tutorial programme might comprise a mixture of:

- large combined groups addressing common interest issues led by an internal or external speaker;
- whole groups working with their tutor to develop a sense of community and general learning and key skills;
- small groups to share common issues, model good learning practice and extend peer support; and,

- one-to-one to discuss individual learning approaches, strengths and weaknesses and to set out a future learning plan.

The timing of tutorials was important to the students and appeared to have an impact on their perceived value. Some tutors also suggested that tutorials were more effective at the beginning of the week when plans for the coming week could be discussed, but this seems to be an problem of clarity of purpose rather than timing. The issue for students was more concerned with the timing of the tutorials within the College day. While a gap between tutorial time and subject time could provide useful unsupervised time, and some students said they made good use of such slots, others failed to have the structure or will to do so. All interviewees cited examples of groups of students who chose to wander into town during unsupervised time between subject and tutorial periods.

Student 1: I can't be bothered to come anyway.
Interviewer: Because it's after lunch?
Student 1: Yes. After this lesson we have to wait 2 hours for 45 minutes and that's what really gets on our nerves.
Student 2: It's a really long time between this lesson and the next one.

Traditionally, within Further Education, there has been a liberal culture fuelled by a spirit of diversity and commitment to meeting local needs. This, however, has led to some fragmentation, with managerial systems and classroom practices tending to be informed by the individual styles and preferences of educational managers, teachers and students, rather than systematic orthodoxies and theoretical persuasions. While there is merit in a flexible approach, tutors in this study, believed that some students were disadvantaged by inexpert tutorial support.

Tutors were aware that not all of them reached the same high standard of delivery for all topics and stressed the need for sharing good practice and professional development in tutoring skills. Although staff development sessions had been offered in some departments, and even across faculties, to share and explicate questions such as *What is the role of the tutor?* and *What should be the form of the tutorial session?*, it was clear that these fundamental issues still needed to be considered by every individual involved in tutorial work. Within the institutional environment, students' personal experiences are eagerly shared and compared. Inconsistencies in arrangements and practices seem to diminish the importance and value of the tutorial system in the eyes of the students.

Tutor Qualities

The students interviewed stressed that almost all their tutors were approachable and available to meet with them, if needed. Most students felt that their tutors knew them well:

> *Student: With the personal tutor you can just go and have a chat if you want about just anything.*

One group of students said that their tutor was good at sorting out both practical and personal problems. This group had an excellent relationship with their tutor, but, in comparison with other tutor groups, may well have been over-reliant on him in the organisation of their college activities. They perceived the tutorial as:

> *Student: more of a talking lesson .... we talk about everything ... the tutor talks about himself. We could go to him for anything.*

A few students argued that the personal tutor was not always the person that they related to best, or found most approachable. Considerations included the personality and perceived influence of the individuals, the nature of potential problems and benefits of choice.

> *Student: I don't really speak to the tutor.*
> *Interviewer: Is there a reason for that?*
> *Student: Not really. I just speak to the subject teachers.*

There was some agreement among tutors about the nature of the role and the characteristics that distinguished a 'good' tutor. Most believed that it was essential for staff involved in tutoring responsibilities to be fully committed to the task. Several said they knew colleagues who were not 'on board' and, consequently, students had picked up negative feelings about tutorial sessions from the tutor. Empathy with students and understanding of their needs and circumstances were also identified as characteristics of good tutors, as were fairness and decisiveness. Although tutors themselves saw the tutorial provision as a way of improving learning, there was no mention of understanding learning skills and strategies as a prerequisite for a personal tutor.

There was much discussion from both the students and tutors about whether there were virtues in students having the same person as their subject teacher and personal tutor. Many students felt that there were positive aspects to this, in that it meant that their tutor would be aware of the issues facing them within the classroom. In the best examples found in the study, this enabled work in the tutorial session to be tightly focussed around the specific learning needs of students. There was evidence here of sound target setting by personal tutors that was closely related to course requirements and specific learning objectives.

On the negative side, there was evidence that the alignment of subject teacher and personal tutor encouraged some tutors to see the tutorial as little more than an opportunity to deal with work that had not been covered during their subject sessions. With such tutors, this role merger appeared to detract from tutorial, rather than subject, responsibilities and a lack of awareness of the nature and purpose of tutorial provision at the College was apparent (see also Green. 2002). This clearly suggests that there is a need for the 'profile' of tutorial provision amongst staff with the dual role to be raised even further.

Where students were involved with more than one subject teacher, the mechanisms for communication between themselves, their personal tutor and the subject teachers were often unclear. The confidentiality of the one-to-one discussion had rarely been considered and students clearly trusted their personal tutors with confidences both within and beyond academic aspirations. However, the nature of the relationship between the tutor and the student was more an issue for lecturers rather than students. Positions that could be adopted within the role, and might potentially conflict with each other, were cited as:

- source of information;
- friend, mentor and guide;
- motivator and persuader;
- advocate;
- disciplinarian.

It appeared that whichever stance tutors favoured was strongly dependent on their personality and prior experiences as tutors. The majority of lecturers had formulated a clear rationale for the prime purposes of the tutor role, and had developed approaches and activities consistent with that. Others were troubled by the tension between different aspects of the relationship and, in consequence were less focussed in their planning and approach. Although not necessarily less experienced as subject teachers, the latter group felt they would benefit from clarification of the role of the tutor and from sharing good practice in one-to-one activities and approaches.

The personal characteristics, background knowledge and experience and preferences of the individual tutor needed to be recognised, firstly by the individual themselves, and secondly by peers and managers. This was seen as important in ensuring that the full range of responsibilities was discharged within the student-tutor relationship.

Tutorials for Retention

The importance of the tutorial system in improving retention was acknowledged. The reasons for student withdrawal are well understood and documented (see, for example, Martinez, 2001b). In this study, there was agreement that retention should always be in the best interests of the student and, to a lesser extent, the class and the College. Occasionally, tutors felt that the best advice a student could have would be to withdraw from a course of study and leave the college.

In our interviews, there was a suggestion that students' propensity to drop out was triggered from an early point on their course. One senior tutor stressed that early drop-out was not contingent on course content as students normally have, at least, partially informed notions of that. He believed that student drop-out was more often a factor of the environment and social network within the College and course. All the tutors interviewed thought that support through the tutorial system could help to prevent unwarranted withdrawal and specific evidence for this was offered from several tutors. It was claimed that support and advice from the tutor and other experts together with socialisation within the peer group were significant factors in preventing early attrition.

This latter point was supported by the importance that students attached to their tutorial groups. Acceptance within that group increased their sense of belonging from an early stage in their college experience. The particular students who we interviewed appeared confident and committed, and claimed no experience of cases where tutor support had prevented an unnecessary withdrawal. These students were in little doubt that their peers were capable of making their own informed choices which were in their own best interests. Tutors were also aware of the limited extent of their influence and were conscious that many of their students were adults with complex and sensitive problems, beyond the remit of a teacher.

This investigation suggested that early drop out can be mitigated, but not eliminated, by appropriate tutorial arrangements. The dynamics of the peer social group may play as great a part in this as the one-to-one tutor dialogue. Group tutorial activities furthering peer support and interaction may be essential (see also Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2001; Martinez, 2001b).

Drop out later in the course may, however, be connected to subject studies. As one tutor said:

> ... *a good performance in class is more likely to keep people.*

A few tutors believed that strategies for improving retention and enhancing achievement were essentially the same, and were driven by the one-to-one discussion. However, most tutors stressed that the prime purpose of the tutorial was to enrich learning:

> *The tutorial is about driving up expectations and standards rather than retention.*

This research indicated that both aspects of the tutorial programme complement each other and are essential for optimum retention and attainment. An initial and on-going task for the group tutor is to use group work to generate peer collegiality and support that can provide familiarity and constancy for students. As a personal tutor, one-to-one sessions are equally important in establishing good staff-student trust and easiness that leads to setting challenging and realistic targets and enhancing learning.

Links with student learning

For most tutors, but not all, learning from tutorial activities was seen in terms of generic and key skills rather than subject information. There were, though, a few tutors who argued that tutorial time was not well spent on key skills and should be more focussed on the examined content of courses that formed the main purpose of the College.

> *Student: I have found that most of my tutorials have been used for extra folder work. Part of the tutorial has also been used as a lesson.*

Some tutors also, on occasion, approached this issue positively, in that they made deliberate use of tutorial time to deal with generic issues that emerged from their curriculum area. As one tutor indicated:

> *Group tutorials are used to discuss and share creative ideas during a project which may last fifteen weeks, in addition to group critique and individual tutorials.*

There was a strong student opinion that tutorial sessions should not merely be an extension of subject activities but should cover different topics and activities. In the main, however, students believed that the function of their personal tutors was to provide them with information and advice. In general, this was linked to College systems and the organisation of future plans rather than the development of learning skills that might cut across subject areas. Nonetheless, when probed, students identified the following areas where help with learning from their tutor had been received:

- positive feedback, with suggestions for improvement such as the need to make better use of language, to put in more detail and use broader ideas and concepts;

- constructing and monitoring action plans;
- discussion of problems (both work-related and social) ;
- identifying study skills;
- organising visits and trips.

Interviewer: Are there ways you can remember that the tutor has helped you with your learning?

Student: If we need help in the Library or something, getting research, they'll come down with us and show us what we should be learning.

Interviewer: So, Library skills. Are there other examples?

Student: Computers. They help us on that.

For several students there was a lack of clarity about the distinction between tutorial sessions and subject lessons. The difference between the two had not been elucidated. This was compounded by the diversity of practice by staff. Students appeared to value tutorial time more when they understood its purpose within the whole College experience and when they perceived clear aims and objectives for the sessions. The extent to which this occurred largely depended on individual tutors' explanations of potential outcomes and worth of personal tutorials. Although students received a planned induction into their college course, an induction to the personal tutor system was not part of this.

For those students who saw little value in group or one-to-one tutorials, the relationship between their own learning and the tutorial experience was often blurred. In addition, this group claimed little ownership over the one-to-one dialogue. Many such students saw the locus of control over learning essentially as lying with their teachers:

Student: In the lesson they saw that we were falling behind, so they put together an action plan and list what you need to do.

Interviewer: So the action plan idea is if you are away or just not coping with the work you have this meeting with the subject teacher?

Student: I had mine with my personal tutor.

Interviewer: You have this meeting and they say you've fallen behind with the work and have been away for two weeks, so here are the things you need to catch up on. Then do you write it on a piece of paper?

Student: They write it and sign it and you actually have to sign it yourself to say that you agree with what they're suggesting.

Too often, the feeling from student respondents was that one-to-one tutorials were done 'to them'. This was evidenced, for example, by references to the paperwork associated with the tutorial process at the College, where responses indicated that in many instances students did

not have a clear idea of either the purpose or destination of the documentation. Again, this seems to support the message emerging from the research studies of Green (2002) and others (see Lodge, 2000). The viewpoints expressed by students indicate the need for systems to address the issue of the degree of student 'ownership' of the tutorial process at the College. It may be, for example, that some of the recent research on feedback and learning in Higher Education (Heylings and Tariq, 2001) with its emphasis on the direct involvement of students through peer tutoring, offers fruitful avenues for investigation.

While clear systems were in place for monitoring and review, there appeared to be little evidence of explicit discussion of metacognitive processes and learning strategies (such as those discussed by Klenowski, 2002) in the one-to-one sessions. Tutors did not talk about themselves as learners, nor did they explore dimensions of learning. This meant that despite improved student competency in setting learning goals, there was still an inference that learning is mainly a process of completion, determined and directed by the teacher. Students need to know that learning tasks are active, collaborative purposeful and owned by them (Lodge 2000; Klenowski, 2002). In order to understand learning, students need to be helped to recognise the links between their learning of facts, theories and skills, their understanding of the processes of learning, and their learning about themselves both as learners and people (Bullock and Wikeley, 2003). All these co-evolve and depend on each other for strength and support. If one is reduced, the whole is limited.

CONCLUSIONS

The major issues that emerged from this small research study related to a number of key questions that might form the basis of informative tutor debate within a college. Such discussions would work towards establishing shared perceptions and values relating to tutorial provision. The issues were:

- to what extent should there be consistency of tutorial purpose and provision across a large and diverse institution?
- what criteria should there be for identifying staff as personal tutors?
- what are the professional development implications of personal tutoring?
- what should be the mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating tutorial provision in an institution?

Regardless of the inconsistencies in experience, there was a general feeling among the student respondents in this study that more importance should be assigned to tutorial work. Although, in the recent past, the College had organised staff development seminars and workshops to raise the profile of personal tutoring, there still seemed to be clear differences of

opinion, within the College, regarding both the role and function of the personal tutor and the effectiveness of practice in the tutorial area. For most of the tutors interviewed, the tutor role was neither their major concern nor perceived to be central to the learning systems within the College.

Tutor respondents also appeared uneasy about the inconsistency across the College regarding tutorial provision. This concern related to two principal aspects: a feeling that some students were not receiving what was seen as an 'entitlement' to personal tutor support; and a view that some staff were entrusted with regular slots for tutorial work but were using this time inappropriately. These points were inter-connected and had implications for the selection of staff as personal tutors. The difficult question of the balance between a consistent approach to student entitlement across a college and staff autonomy is one that is strongly debated by writers such as Martinez (2001b) and Green (2002).

Evidence from staff respondents (see also Green, 2002; Bullock & Wikeley 2000) suggested that there was divided opinion on whether personal tutors should be chosen from all staff at the College or limited to those who expressed an interest or who had some expertise in the area. Allied to this was the question of whether (and how) part-time staff should be brought into the domain. Strongly held positions were observed on these issues, with some staff arguing that, at the very least, all full-time members of staff should be involved as a personal tutor of students. In reality, the need to identify a sufficient number of personal tutors from an existing pool of lecturers can result in limited options.

This stance implies the need for dedicated induction and professional development in all forms of tutoring for all lecturers in further education. Whatever the criteria employed by a college to identify staff as personal tutors, responses to this study emphasised the importance of professional development. In support of the interviews, data from the staff questionnaire indicated that, for almost two-thirds of respondents, becoming a personal tutor at the College was their first experience of tutoring. Linked to this, the questionnaire responses identified only 42% of respondents who had had any professional development related to their role as a personal tutor (see also Marland & Rogers, 1997). There is, clearly, a need to draw on strategies such as mentoring for new personal tutors, modelling of positive personal tutoring, and sharing of techniques for small group and one-to-one discussions. The comments of Green (2002) in relation to the planned and structured observation of effective tutorial practice are likely to be of some relevance here.

Other respondents felt equally passionately that personal tutoring required skills and qualities that were not found in every member of staff. These respondents felt that it would be of more benefit for students to receive tutor support from individuals who were more naturally inclined to the interpersonal approaches fundamental in supporting students' learning and well-being. This view implies a larger role for fewer tutors with talent and enthusiasm in this area. Conferring status on such tutors (super tutors?) with the consequent professionalisation of the role would be persuasive.

In the College, there was support for the newly-created role of senior tutor though this was leavened, in some staff respondents, by a lack of awareness of their remit. Reservations focused around the priority senior tutors gave to providing direct support for tutors and, additionally, the part played by senior tutors in the monitoring and evaluation of tutorial provision. Both questionnaires and interviews indicated that some staff felt there was a need for senior tutors to provide detailed lesson plans and resources that staff could use during timetabled tutorial slots. Other tutors felt happy with the more distant, monitoring role of the senior tutors and were content to make use of them essentially as a fall-back position. An opportunity for colleagues to work through and develop a clear, shared understanding of the respective responsibilities of the personal tutor, the senior tutor and other external agencies, and how these inter-relate was felt to be a priority. This was especially relevant in areas such as the monitoring of attendance, the progress of students within the taught curriculum, and the overall welfare of students.

For personal tutoring to have a real impact on learning and retention it is necessary, firstly, for both students and tutors to recognise the value of planning and understanding the processes of learning, and secondly, for the tutor to be the fulcrum of each student's individual strategies for learning. As Gray (1995) stressed, one of the three indicators of an effective school is that each student has a vital relationship with, at least, one teacher. The role of the personal tutor in helping students develop skills of personal reflection and self assessment cannot be understated. The recognition of the importance of the personal tutor and clarity of provision for each student is probably more valuable than consistency across an institution.

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EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND DIALOGUES BETWEEN STUDENTS AND THEIR PERSONAL TUTORS

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ABSTRACT

The complexity of learning has long been recognised by practitioners. Not merely the product of some taught experience; effective learning is moulded by personal attributes and attitudes that interact uniquely in different learning contexts. Hence, personal tutoring is being adopted, and specifically customized, by a range of institutions who believe it will support students' understanding of themselves as learners and will establish good habits of learning, both now and in the future. The quality of the educational relationship that is created between the tutor and the learner is crucial in the development of the student as a confident and competent (life long) learner.

This paper draws on recent research in schools and colleges to explore the educational relationships that underpin and nurture individual learning discussions. We suggest that a supportive teacher-learner dialogue focuses on personal goals, motivational factors and strategies and skills for learning. A positive climate in tutorial sessions is characterised by challenging but realistic expectations and targets. Feedback to students should be clear and specific and stress strategies for improvement. The skill of successful self-assessment is an important progression from personal understanding. Educational relationships need to provide a warm and encouraging framework for understanding what it means to be critical and to identify and explore criteria for success.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The complexity of learning has long been recognised by educational researchers and practitioners. Not merely the product of some taught experience, effective learning is moulded first by the community of practice in which it is situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and second, by the personal attributes and attitudes that interact uniquely in different learning situations. Understanding these learning dispositions (Carr & Claxton, 2004) or environments

for learning (Ferguson & Fraser, 1999; Noyes, 2004) has become a major focus for research in learning and teaching over the past few years.

A fundamental strand in the exploration of such contexts of learning is the educational relationship that is created between the learner and the teacher. This was established by Vygotsky (1978) who suggested that for learning to take place successfully, some form of relationship with others needs to be developed. Noyes (2004) further argues that a variety of sociocultural relationships, one of which is formed by the teacher and pupil, is the major determinants of pupils' responses to learning in school. Rudduck and colleagues (1996) affirm that relationships at school are an important influence affecting students' attitudes to their learning and note that students value the teacher-student relationship particularly when teachers are available to talk to them about their learning and schoolwork. MacBeath et al. (1996), in their seminal work on school self-evaluation, highlight students' need for support and good quality relationships with an informed adult while Claxton (1990) further supports these ideas in identifying talk as an important strategy for learning,

> *If you can talk to your teachers, or your Mum and Dad or, most importantly, your friends about school work you may be in a more powerful position than those who cannot.*
> (Claxton, 1990: 107)

In recent years, the deliberate setting up of such relationships has been influenced by research that has suggested that learning in school (and beyond) can be aided by individual or small group review and discussion between students and their tutor (Broadfoot, 1988; Watts, 1994; Waterhouse, 1991; Lodge, 2000). Innovations in this format such as flexible learning, personal development planning and individual career planning have both flourished and floundered; usually dependent on government policy or sources of funding rather than an unbiased judgement about their impact on learning. Despite this, the view that understanding of, and confidence in, learning can be enhanced by a clear approach to planning one's own learning through the support of a personal tutor has gained strength. Personal tutoring places a one-to-one or small group, discussion between tutors and their pupils at the heart of the learning process. Increasingly, this system is being adopted, and specifically customized, by a range of institutions who believe that the individual educational relationships established between students and their tutors will engender good habits of learning, both now and in the future. Benefits of such approaches are seen as:

- motivating and increasing self confidence by involving students in planning their own learning and personal development;
- ensuring that students regularly review progress and set learning and other targets with tutors;

- supporting increased academic performance;
- developing communication, negotiation and planning skills in students.

However, research that explores the educational relationships which underpin and nurture individual learning discussions is sparse. This paper draws on our recent work in this area in schools and colleges. It suggests that the quality of the educational relationship that is created between the tutor and the learner is crucial in the development of the student as a confident and competent (life long) learner and identifies factors that enhance and detract from such relationships.

EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN PERSONAL TUTORING

With the conceptualisation of learning as personal development derived from social and cultural interactions, there is an increasing role in schools and colleges for personal tutors who have a responsibility to support the learning of individual students. A one-to-one or (possibly) small group discussion provides the additionality in this system and is the basis of a key educational relationship that is distinct from other student-teacher contacts. Interpersonal interactions are invariably set within a milieu or context and the culture of the institution, therefore, has an impact on them. Each educational relationship will be unique but will, at the same time, be fashioned by the prevailing culture of the school or college. Understanding how successful learning relationships between students and their personal tutors are established and nurtured is essential.

An educational relationship can be formal or informal, implicit or explicit. In the main, the student-personal tutor educational relationship needs to be both formal and explicit. The emphasis must always be on the development of learning and it will continue only while the student belongs to an institutional, or perhaps, particular form or class group. The educational relationship between students and their personal tutor is usually founded on the well-understood action planning cycle. This starts with an explication of future goals and a consideration of personal strengths and weaknesses in relation to these. This analysis enables the student to identify targets for improvement and to construct a plan for action (Hopkins & McGilchrist, 1998). The ways in which aspects of the cycle are addressed are crucial in sustaining the educational relationship.

Establishing the educational relationship

Good one-to-one discussions aim to help students explore their current successes and disappointments; articulate their feelings and attitudes about where they are now; and then plan future action. Strategies for achieving this will not be the same for each student and some students will benefit more than others. At its most effective, such a discussion can

promote self-awareness and self-confidence, opportunity awareness and the development of planning skills at all stages of learning. At its minimal level, the dialogue can become an interview that helps individuals select appropriate options at a particular phase in their lives. At its worst, it can be an intrusion into private matters. Unless both participants see it as closely focused on the student as a learner, its purpose becomes vague and confused.

Identifying the focus

A supportive teacher-learner dialogue focuses on personal goals, motivational factors and strategies and skills for learning. Our research has stressed that to be effective, one-to-one discussions must be focused on individual learning and personal goals (Bullock & Wikeley, 2004). Teachers are not counsellors. Nor should they be. There are school and college procedures, supporting agencies and legal parameters for issues beyond the personal and professional scope of the teacher. While there may be a case for specialists in the counselling area, classroom practitioners should be primarily concerned with learning.

The educational relationship between the student and their personal tutor is different from that between the student and the subject teacher. The latter can create a situation where a positive academic self-concept is only associated with particular subjects and not with a perception of the self as a learner. This, in itself, can lead to self-stereotyping and rejection of some aspects of learning. How often do we hear, *'I am no good at maths' or 'English....'* or some other curriculum focus. There is no unique 'right' practice for learning. Each task generates a different way of learning for every individual and individuals will use different learning techniques for different tasks at different life stages. A personal understanding that enables students to consider and select an appropriate strategy for a particular learning situation, and also allows them to make informed judgements about the effectiveness of their learning, as opposed to achievement in a particular subject, is crucial. This is the domain of the personal tutor. Separating the learning focus from the subject enables students to develop a sense of identity as a learner, rather than a learner of mathematics, English, and such like. In this way it promotes an understanding of the nature of life long learning.

Controlling the Discussion

Although successful educational relationships do not have to involve complete parity, it is important that the dialogue should be, at least partly, within the control of the student. Most classroom discourse is at the invitation of the teacher (see Norman, 1992) and conducted in an open forum. Activities such as one-to-one tutorials for planning learning put students in a different relationship with their tutors, and remove the distraction or influence of the peer group. It should not be assumed, however, that the perceptions of tutors and students are the same. Although most tutors in our research saw one-to-one discussions as a student led

process, a number of students saw it as a school or college process (often before making option choices) with the tutors asking questions and setting the agenda. The students commented that '*the tutor asks questions*' while a few tutors observed that students found it hard to talk to them. Unless the student is fully engaged in the process in the sense of retaining some power and control, it will always remain a 'teaching' situation rather than one of 'learning' (Fielding, 2001).

We observed some tutors who found it difficult to relinquish control. Many teachers' self image is bound to the task of 'teaching', and handing over some of the power to students in order to let them create an understanding of themselves as learners (which will not always match that of the teacher) can be antithetical to their established values and practice, and hence, is a courageous step. In addition, making the connections between a process that is focused on involving students in their learning and the increasing expectation in schools and colleges for improved performance in subject areas is a real tension for teachers. In our research (Bullock and Wikeley, 1999) this tension was often expressed in terms of the uneasy relationship between personal learning targets (an outcome of this particular process) and more subject-oriented targets. These barriers need to be addressed both by personal tutors and institutions implementing this approach.

Learning from Each Other

The tutoring role, therefore, can also be a learning experience for the tutor and this reciprocity may be crucial to successful educational relationships. Our research (Wikeley, 2000) indicated that where tutors acknowledged this in discussion with their students, the educational relationship was strengthened. However, only a few tutors saw themselves as learners in the relationship. Philip and Hendry (2000) observed that adult mentors working with young people interpreted mentoring as a form of 'cultural capital' for themselves. They identified four ways in which mentors benefited from their work with young people.

- It enabled them to make sense of their own past experiences.
- It was an opportunity to gain insights into the realities of other people's lives and to learn from these.
- It had potential to develop alternative kinds of relationships which were reciprocal and across generations.
- It built up a set of psycho-social skills as 'exceptional adults' able to offer support challenge and a form of friendship.

(Philip and Hendry, 2000: 218)

MAINTAINING THE EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIP

The setting of targets both to review school performance and to enhance pupil performance has been at the heart of government policy in recent years (DfES. 2004). In almost all our observations, evidence to inform target setting was a major element in the one-to-one sessions between a student and his or her personal tutor. In contrast we found very little evidence that tutors discussed *how* to explore strategies for better learning with their students. Often, both parties failed to maximise the wider benefits of the educational relationship for learning about their own styles and preferences and for using these in the learning context. A one-to-one student-centred dialogue is not, by itself, a blueprint for learning about yourself as a learner and the connections need to be made explicit.

Setting and achieving targets

There has been much discussion about how to construct a good target (Ofsted, 1996, Flecknoe, 2001; Martinez, 2001). The acronym SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timed) has been used to help tutors and mentors work with their students in developing sound targets. Evidence used to focus this dialogue is related to personal and social development, school activities and work and expectations beyond school. It can include:

- grades and marks;
- other monitoring data (merits, attendance, lateness, behaviour etc);
- teacher on-going assessments;
- student self assessments; or
- out of school achievements.

Effective tutors also ensured that students had the practical knowledge to help them meet these targets. For example they discussed sources of information such as libraries, books, internet and so on and sometimes, when necessary, referred students to other teachers or adults who could offer advice; thus integrating other relationships into the learning process. However, in many schools and colleges the systems for obtaining informal support from other teachers, adults and peers were not well established and this is, perhaps, symptomatic of a narrow view of target setting.

The perceived stress on targets has appeared to encourage the misconception that setting targets is equivalent to learning. Many students have come to regard a target as a task for completion. However, they may or may not achieve it; and may or may not learn from it. In general terms, educational relationships have not encouraged students to consider the link between targets and learning, nor have they identified the generic learning skills that could be practised in achieving a target. A key idea that students need to understand is that a target

represents a step towards a learning goal. Target setting and learning are both active and reflective. In our experience, there is very little discussion in schools and colleges as to why targets are a useful tool for learning, and many students and tutors are overwhelmed by what they perceive as target overload:

> *Although you talk to your tutor about what you want to do, there's not a lot of guidance about how to achieve it.*
> (Year 9 male student, comprehensive school)

> *You are just getting ready for the summer holiday and they give you more targets!*
> (Year 10 female student, comprehensive school)

Where is the ownership of learning in the last quote? One of the most powerful features of target setting is the educational relationship that conspires to articulate it. While constructing two or three SMART targets for personal goals and achievements is regarded as a successful outcome from a one-to-one discussion between a student and their personal tutor, the relationship itself also provides understanding, support and advocacy from the tutor (Martinez, 2001).

Self Assessment and Evaluation

Some (see Boud, 1995) believe that self assessment or testing your own understanding is the key to effective lifelong learning. Learning is a developmental process and knowing when your understanding has moved on, and when it has not, is a vital characteristic of learning. Self assessment is an important factor in being able to evaluate, critically, your own efforts. It allows individuals to ascertain their own effectiveness in any action and to inform choices that will build on strengths and address weaknesses. Approaching this in an objective manner (although it is obviously essentially a subjective judgement) involves gathering evidence in order to make judgements about the quality of your own efforts and the potentiality of making improvement; that is, it has a formative dimension. The role of the tutor, usually in a one-to-one discussion, is to provide a non-judgmental opportunity for students to identify, discuss objectively and value the evidence for assessing their own progress, either in subject areas or in generic learning skills.

The problem is that students are accustomed to having their activities appraised and assessed by their teachers. They see this as a means of identifying what they have attained (or learned) and use it as a normative comparison of their own outcomes and behaviours in relation to that of their peers. Positive outcomes from this may be superficial and short lived while

disappointing results can be seriously demotivating and discouraging. The increased use of performance data within schools and colleges and their publication, both locally and nationally, creates a benchmark system whereby students judge their own success primarily in terms of outcomes and in comparison with others. However, knowing whether or not your externally-assessed performance exceeds that of your peers does not, particularly, help in the processes of learning. It is the ability to judge your current performance against the reality of your potential performance that is crucial.

In general, students are not prepared for assessing and judging their own actions with a view to identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses that can be used to improve their own learning. Students' understanding of the concepts of critical thinking and evaluation tends to be both limited and unsophisticated, focusing on criticism (often negative) and being sceptical (Bailin et al., 1999). Nonetheless, when pressed, most students can offer a premise of what it takes to be a good learner and (an often nebulous view of) how their own efforts match up (Muschamp & Bullock, 2003). Articulating this unambiguously with a personal tutor can be an opportunity to for learners to recognise the constituents of their own 'best effort' and to identify their own route to attaining that. Learners need to compare strategies and discuss standards with others so that they can rationalise and articulate their self evaluations. Self-assessment, therefore, cannot take place in isolation. Like learning, it needs to occur in relationship with others (Boud, 1995).

Recognising success

In order to assess your own efforts it is necessary, first, to understand the appropriate criteria which should be applied in each case. Unless you know what counts as good work, it is impossible to judge your own. Despite teachers' concern that a good piece of written work should, for example, demonstrate a coherent argument, research shows that uncritical students invariably believe length and presentation to be most important to the assessment criteria (Bullock et al., 2002). Students tend to equate more effort with more writing and hence the achievement of higher grades: their view is that 'more equals better'.

In many programmes (for example, coursework and other assessed project work) students are required, explicitly, to evaluate their own work. Although some students acknowledge that critical and creative learning (indicated by structure, argument and understanding) would 'get them marks', few know how to show it by demonstrating that they have answered the question and evaluated their own efforts. Teachers agree that the evaluation requirement of assessed project work demands engagement with critical thinking processes, and they acknowledge the difficulties in preparing their students effectively for this. Not all teachers feel that the development of skills of critical evaluation is a readily attainable goal for

particular students at the secondary school stage (Martin et al., 2002) and it is clear that students need more understanding and explication of the activities and the steps that are appropriate in assessing and evaluating your own performance.

> *They* [students] *can be led to achieve reasonable standards in describing their data, but when it comes to analysing it and giving evaluations of it, then it becomes far more difficult. [...] It's the evaluation where they need most help.*
> (Geography teacher, comprehensive school)

Some teachers provide their students with highly structured templates of how an evaluation should be written. Others feel that enabling strategies, such as discussions and explanations of the nature and processes of critical evaluation, allow students to develop critical skills more fully. In one-to-one discussions between a student and their personal tutor, encouraging personal engagement and honest self appraisal is the key aim. This should help the student recognise the difference between their capabilities for learning and the label given by their latest mark sheet. Subject teachers tend to predict future performance by past performance, but students need a realistic understanding of themselves in which judgements are based on knowledge about whether, for example, a piece of work has been a struggle or was dashed off in five minutes in front of the television. The tutor's role is to help students face these realities and to come to a better understanding of their true potential.

The context for enabling self evaluation can be crucial, and here the personal tutor has a major role in helping students take an overview of all their attainments. We found that students, working in subject areas at the whole class or at the individual level, often associate critical thinking with stressful, negative appraisal. Teacher-student interactions that monitor the quality of work are frequently seen to be situations where the 'cards are stacked' in the teacher's favour and can be perceived by students as confrontations and apparent challenges to their individuality and identity. Although subject teachers work to encourage self-critical and evaluative skills such as questioning prior knowledge and experience, testing out and applying new knowledge, and promoting learner responsibility through reflection and evaluation, even capable students fail to associate these skills with successful learning across the curriculum. Most regard the skills as particular to the specific subject, or even activity.

In contrast, student-student interactions in small group work (for example, discussing texts and media in English or carrying out fieldwork in geography), are valued by students as unthreatening and more conducive to fostering the skills of critical thinking and self understanding (Morehouse, 1997). Students feel that, in small groups, they can share their work without reservation. In these different educational relationships, informal comparison with the efforts of their classmates allows students to identify the critical indicators of quality

and model effective learning. If tutors are to be successful in nurturing skills of self assessment and evaluation they need to recreate the safe, equitable environment of the student-student groups whilst using their own experience to create more challenge.

Giving feedback

From an early age, children respond and react to feedback from their parents, teachers and peers. Adult response can, however, be authoritarian, negative and unsystematic, or alternatively, soft, over-supportive and affirming; whereas, feedback from peers is often unrealistic and emotional. The information gleaned from unstructured conversation can be unconsciously self-selected and, hence, what is assimilated may be only one version of the reality. Structure, reinforcement and capability are needed to build up a true picture. Capability is required from both participants in a dialogue: the person giving the feedback and also from the one receiving it. In the quest for self-understanding, feedback needs to be both accurate and acceptable. The student must be able to assimilate the new knowledge into their current self-portrait and, if necessary, adjust the picture. In a study concerned with mentoring of student primary teachers, Hayes (2001) found that the students who prospered were those who had feedback from their host teachers that was specific, acknowledging strengths and weaknesses but in such as way as to suggest strategies for addressing problems. Feedback, and its accompanying discussion, needs to be used to engage the learner in the process of making explicit the connections between their own instinctive, intuitive ways of learning and the more formal, outcome-focused learning of the classroom. Feedback also helps personal reflection that, in turn, enables students to make better judgements about the effectiveness of their learning strategies.

Tutors, often more than students themselves, welcomed the dialogues for the level of insight they provided about their students' perceptions, experiences and difficulties. However, the important role the tutors have here is in reflecting that insight back to students in such a way as to enable them to develop a better understanding of themselves as learners. It should not be forgotten that this is an educational relationship. In the most propitious cases, such insights allowed teachers to be more confident in providing the appropriate scaffolding to help the student plan their learning. However, there is a vital step in connecting that scaffolding to the student's own perceptions and experiences. Unless this is made explicit the tutor is in danger of controlling the learning process. For example, in a study using metaphor to explore students' concepts of their learning in chemistry (Thomas and McRobbie, 1999) one student described her learning as a maze with a range of opportunities, some of which would prove to be dead ends. However, this same student did not see it as her responsibility to find her way through the maze, but the role of the teacher to show her the way. Understanding which false starts the student is likely to take may be helpful to the teacher in planning his or

her teaching strategies but unless that is shared with the student and the student also understands and can see the bigger picture she is unlikely to gain a clearer sense of self and her own 'idiosyncratic personal characteristics' as a learner (Damon, 1983 in Bornholt, 2000). This reflecting back to students how their own perceptions help the tutor suggest ways forward would appear to be an important part of the feedback.

CONCLUSIONS

Learning is formed through social and cultural interactions. The personal tutor- student relationship is only one of many that may influence a student's disposition to learning at specific stages of education. This relationship needs to support and complement other educational experiences whether in the school, the college or beyond. To understand and feel confident in learning, students need to be helped to recognise the links between:

- their learning of facts, theories and skills;
- their learning of the processes of learning; and
- their learning about themselves as learners.

All these co-evolve and depend on each other for strength and support. If one is reduced, the whole process of learning is likely to be limited. For too long learning has concentrated on the first of the points above. The educational relationship and dialogue between students and their personal tutors can act to redress the balance.

A supportive educational relationship has a clear focus on personal goals, motivational factors and strategies and skills for learning. Ideally, it is built on one-to-one discussions that are directed by the student as well as the tutor. In a successful educational relationship, it is important that the tutor also sees him or herself as a learner. A positive climate in tutorial sessions is characterised by challenging but realistic expectations and targets. The skill of successful self-assessment is an important progression from personal understanding. Educational relationships need to provide a warm and encouraging framework for understanding what it means to be critical and to identify and explore criteria for success. Feedback to students should be clear and specific and include discussion of strategies for improvement.

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REFLECTING ON PEDAGOGY:

OUTCOMES FROM A BEACON SCHOOL NETWORK

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Abstract

This paper arises from an initiative set up by four Beacon Schools to enhance the professional development of teachers, and hence, raise pupil attainment in all schools in the local education authority (LEA). The initiative provided opportunities for teachers to work in cross-institutional interest groups, with the aim of sharing good practice and reflecting on classroom strategies that would better support pupil learning. Strategies for effective teaching approaches were discussed and translated into systematic plans for small action research studies. This paper uses semi-structured interviews with the teachers participating in the action research studies to present findings on how teachers use explanatory frameworks to represent and develop their understandings of their own pedagogy and their pupils' learning. In particular, teachers' explanations of the factors that inhibit learning are examined so that common perspectives arising from individual reflection can be identified. An analysis of these common perspectives of learning provides insight into our understanding of the teacher's own reflective practice and how this impacts on their professional development.

The Beacon Schools Initiative

Beacon Schools were established in 1998. They are high performing (judged by Ofsted inspections and reports) nursery, primary, secondary or special schools who have been selected to receive additional funding from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), normally for a period of three years. In return, they are required to work in partnership with other schools to establish an agreed programme of activities that will identify, share and disseminate effective practice. The ultimate aim is to promote the professional development of all teachers and to raise overall standards of pupil attainment. At the time of our research, there were over 1000 Beacon Schools (DfES, 2004 online). In the secondary sector, this status is currently being replaced by the Leading Edge Partnership (LEP) programme and the Beacon Schools programme will be phased out by August 2005.

Beacon Schools have tackled their responsibilities for professional development in a variety of ways. Networks for sharing good practice have been established, resources have been produced and disseminated and changes evaluated. However, the designation of Beacon or Leading Edge School coupled with the requirement for provision of support and advice to other schools may not automatically lead to enhanced professional development. A survey by Burton & Brundrett (2000) indicated that teachers in Beacon Schools were concerned not to compromise what they saw as their prime purpose of teaching children in order to meet the demands for support from other schools. On the other hand, Rudduck et al. (2000) believe that schools can (and do) learn from each other, even within the current climate of competition, but that a sustained relationship between institutions is necessary to make the learning transformative.

These concerns were noted by one local education authority (LEA) in the South West of England. In this authority, the four schools with Beacon status (two secondary and two primary) collaborated on an initiative to encourage teachers to analyse their own practice and to examine the relationship between their preferred approaches and their pupils' achievement. Representatives from the four Beacon Schools met on a regular basis to explore ideas, and the initiative for change was driven by their shared experiences and values. A major activity identified within this shared programme was the dissemination of good practice to schools within the authority, including some identified as needing support. At a joint meeting with the local education authority (LEA) the team agreed that this dissemination was likely to be most effective if other schools were invited to join the Beacon cluster in a joint school-based research programme. This decision reflected their shared conviction that, while all schools (including those with Beacon status) can learn from each other's expertise, improved practice and higher standards are achieved by groups of teachers taking responsibility for reflecting on their own teaching and learning strategies, identifying weaknesses and working to overcome these.

Further discussion then followed to identify a problem within the authority that schools would be interested to address together. The group identified the underachievement of boys as a suitable topic as it appeared to be a phenomenon affecting all phases and sectors and was a key item in the LEA's Education Development Plan.

The initiative was launched with a conference and workshop. Almost two thirds of schools in the authority released at least one teacher to attend. The keynote presentation covered current theories relating to boys' attainment and teachers were asked to reflect on the implications of these for their own class or school. Working in small, shared interest groups, the teachers then identified an area of concern in their own context and practice. Ideas for change and improvement were discussed and translated into systematic plans for school-based action research studies. Evidence that might be collected to judge the effectiveness of the outcomes from the action was also identified as criteria for success (see Denscombe, 1998).

We (the authors of this paper) were invited to work with the network of schools to support the various action research projects and the professional development of the participating teachers. This was done by providing workshops on research methods, overviews of appropriate literature and individual advice as the teachers reviewed their practice, then planned, carried out and appraised their individual curriculum initiatives. For us, (as for Rudduck et al., 2000) a key question arising from the staff development activities engendered by the Beacon Schools initiative was how (and if) teachers use these experiences to inform and reconstruct their pedagogy.

Action Research as Professional Development

The benefits of this 'hands on' style of professional development lay in the ownership and particular relevance of each activity to the participant's own institution. Nonetheless, each individual action research enquiry was reinforced by a common strategy to follow the cycle of 'appreciation, action and re-appreciation' envisioned by Schön (1983, 1991) and underpinned by collaborative activity emerging from participation in a 'partnership among learners' (Niemi, 2002). The participating teachers indicated that they felt comfortable with this self-directed approach, yet were motivated by the opportunities for collaboration with other schools with similar concerns.

The integration of the role of the researcher with that of the teacher is not new. As Elliott points out: 'Stenhouse's view of educational research implies *doing* research as an integral part of the role of the teacher and this is now well established in the world of action research' (Elliott, 2001: 569). The purposes of the research may include:

- the generation of 'personal knowledge about changing ourselves as professionals through the redefinition of the situation in the examination of the evidence';
- personal and professional development; and
- engaging in 'productive and critical questioning'; grappling with the 'distinction between theory and practice' (O'Hanlon, 1995).

Somekh's position paper on action research is also helpful in setting out the claims and the diversity of action researchers (Somekh 1995; Somekh and Pearson, 2002). She explains how:

> *action research has a highly pragmatic orientation. It recognises that there is trade off between the benefits of giving practitioners the central role in research (e.g. they alone have the power and ability to bring about change in the field of action) and the resulting limitations in terms of the time they can devote to research and their lack of certain kinds of specialist knowledge (e.g. their skills of data analysis).*
> (Somekh, 1995: 341).

With an increase in centralised policy making in schools, Hopkins argues that there is now a mandate for the teacher researcher (Hopkins 2002 p. iix) and that at the same time school improvement programmes have facilitated the integration of research with teaching:

> *there has been the creation of an infrastructure to enable the knowledge base, both 'best practice' and research findings to be utilised. This has involved an internal focus on collaborative patterns of staff development that enables teachers to enquire into practice, and external strategies for dissemination and networking.*
> (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001, p.462 -3).

However, in previous work we have noted the difficulties teachers have in identifying appropriate questions for their research (Muschamp & Wikeley, 2002), and in reformulating their own learning as models for others (Bullock & Wikeley, 2004) - which has prompted us to further explorations of teachers' thinking and conceptualisations in this current project. There is, at present, a widespread belief that action research by teachers is a worthwhile endeavour that, almost inevitably, leads to improved classroom practice and better pupil learning. This persists despite a lack of clear understanding of the reflective, reconstructive and confirming processes teachers go through when taking the stance of researcher.

Reflecting on Pedagogy

Reflection is the practice of thinking analytically about an experience or an activity. It is shaped by feelings and understandings that may be tacit (Polanyi, 2004 online) rather than known and accepted. We decided therefore, that it was important to explore the beliefs and perceptions that underpinned and informed the reflective process. We believed that an

analysis of the teachers' explanations about the problems that they wished to address in action research would reveal much about their views of learning, and that this, potentially, would give us an insight into both their own learning and their pupils' learning. Therefore by tracking these explanations with the projects that they put in place we intended to investigate the ways in which teachers used reflection to improve their practice. As Hopkins and Reynolds (2001: 467) point out, the within school variation in practice is already acknowledged and creates problems with the focus for school improvement projects aimed at either the school level or the classroom/teacher or learning level. Both the action research studies and our meta-research enquiry were conducted over a time span of 18 months.

This paper draws on the conceptualisation and planning of the action research projects. In the first instance it uses our set of interviews with teachers participating in the action research studies to present findings on how teachers use explanatory frameworks to represent and shape their own pedagogy and their understandings of learning. In particular, we examine teachers' explanations of the factors that inhibit learning so that common perspectives arising from individual reflection can be identified. Second, we look at how further analysis of these perspectives can provide insight to the teachers' reflective practice. Finally we identify ways in which the teachers' explanatory frameworks are likely to enhance or constrain the impact of their research projects on their own pedagogy and, consequently, on their professional development.

Research Design

The research follows qualitative and interpretive traditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The main data collecting strategy was semi-structured interviews. This was supplemented by notes and observations from meetings relating to the planning and monitoring of the project. In the initial stages of the Beacon Schools professional development initiative, ten teachers (five primary and five secondary) agreed to share their early thinking and experiences with us. The respondents were selected as being representative of those involved in action research activities and also of the teaching profession in general in that they spanned the ranges of age, experience and responsibility and covered both genders. Five of the teachers were working in Beacon Schools. In this early phase of the Beacon Schools project, the participating teachers had been eager to become involved in an action research study relevant to their own school and class experiences. Our sample, therefore, appeared to represent the more motivated and proactive end of the spectrum of teachers. Nonetheless, their reflections on the barriers to pupils' learning and their conceptualisation and articulation of possible solutions to these provide an insight to the beliefs and factors that shape teachers' actions in improving their own practice.

As was suggested by the Beacon Schools project, all the teachers interviewed had identified a problem that they felt was hindering pupils' learning within their own school. To this end, they had reflected on their own experiences and approaches and had discussed their observations with colleagues. The teachers had described and examined their practice, observed changes in pupils' behaviours and skills, evaluated consequences and questioned unexpected occurrences in the school and classroom. The aim of our research was to systematize and elucidate these happenings and to identify the factors that better support learning.

> *The kind of things we will get is really just a better understanding of what goes on in class. A better understanding of what might help boys stay on task.*
> (Headteacher, primary beacon school)

We use the transcripts from these first interviews as our principal data sets. The interviews focussed on three main areas:

- teachers' explanations of the current problems identified for their action research project, their preferred teaching methods and their awareness of alternative teaching strategies;
- shared understanding of pedagogy, working as a team , sharing ideas and accommodating the views of colleagues;
- how the explanatory frameworks used by the teachers impact on their professional development as they plan to improve the efficacy of their teaching through collaborative research and development projects.

We go on to analyse how the teachers described the problems that they encountered and suggest what this tells us about a shared view of pedagogy. We explore whether there is a tension between reflective practice which can sound introspective, and shared understandings which the school improvement literature (and the learning literature) tells us is necessary for whole school changes.

A general overview of the initiative

The teachers interviewed had volunteered to participate in the Beacon Schools initiative. Without exception, they perceived themselves as learners as well as teachers, with even long experienced head teachers claiming they still had much to learn. Most were refreshingly motivated in their concern for their pupils and their attitudes towards the teaching profession. The teachers claimed to benefit from routine reflection, and described themselves as flexible and outward looking. They embraced variety and sought new ideas. As one head teacher said:

> *Loads of creative things I think. I don't like to stick to particular styles. I like to take things from lots of different angles.*

(Headteacher, primary beacon school)

Most expressed an interest in recent research and felt that they would benefit from keeping abreast of the latest thinking. There was a desire to use research findings to improve practices, systems and resources in the school. However, the teachers felt constrained by the continuous pressures of school work and the lack of time for supplementary reading. In reality, only one or two of the sample used published research findings to inform their individual action research projects. Despite the espoused value placed on theory, most teachers relied on practical experience, either first or second hand, to improve practice.

The opportunity to work in partnership with other schools was seen as a real benefit of this initiative. Comments from the teachers indicated their enthusiasm for this kind of shared learning and professional development. Stepping outside your own school and comparing and contrasting issues with other teachers was expressed as a highly motivating experience.

I think when you're involved in a project it's quite a motivation. People are motivated to do it. You get the opportunity to meet people, try things in other schools and a chance to discuss it and I think it's the motivation and the access related to it, time to talk about it and look back that's useful.
(Headteacher, primary beacon school)

So that works very well. Our benefit is that we're learning from their experience. Interestingly enough, although they're a Beacon or leading edge, they are saying – ..... that they're gaining as much from us as we are from them and I think it is that cross-fertilisation, that ability to exchange ideas from a different school, that stimulates people and generates interest and will develop them as professionals and it's a fantastic opportunity.....
(Deputy head, secondary school)

In this initiative, there was no division between Beacon and non-Beacon Schools. All our respondents believed they had something to give and something to learn. The role of one 'more capable other' in structuring and scaffolding learning for the others did not exist. Even the views of the 'guru' presenting the keynote session at the initial conference were critically analysed and, in many cases, adapted to suit current plans. However, the teachers who were initiating the action research studies needed to have the confidence that their project was sensible and worthwhile before they shared it widely with their colleagues within and beyond the school. Senior Leadership Teams, other teachers and research group members were variously used as critical friends. In reality, most of the teachers were both the more capable other and the learner in different situations.

So I think taking things in that spirit, right from the start we've very much tried to go in at a partnership level, where every activity we took on board really was about looking to see whether we could learn from each other and really that does work. I think it is good to see it as a two way thing and I think everybody has something they can contribute.
(Beacon co-ordinator, secondary beacon school)

In identifying concerns about attainment to address in their action planning, teachers talked about inherent difficulties with individual pupils, friendship groups or classes. At Key Stage 1 (ages 5 to 7 years) teachers tended to observe individual children and identify why intended outcomes were not achieved for particular pupils. At Key Stage 2 (7 to 11 years) and secondary (11 to 18 years) level, effective practice was judged more according to group responses and outcomes of tests and examinations. Secondary schools often identified broader issues to explore, for example, how can we introduce more practical activities into the Humanities curriculum?

Findings

The analysis of data in relation to the school-based projects gives us three emerging patterns of the ways in which teachers discuss the problems in their schools (see also Morgan & Morris, 1999). These are:

1. the child's fault/attributes;
2. their own (or teachers') lack of understanding or skills;
3. the impact of external constraints or opportunities.

Our respondents provided slightly different views from the (much larger) sample in Morgan and Morris's interviews. In that study, teachers were more likely to attribute reasons why some students learn better than others to something to do with the pupil or home background than to their own limitations. The majority of our teachers acknowledged that there was more than one source of the problem.

Further analysis of these perspectives suggests that the teachers' evaluations of the problems that they needed to address in their schools reflected their views of their role and work as a teacher. We believe that understanding these perspectives offers insight into the ways in which the projects were likely to change the teachers' practice and lead to professional development.

1. *The child's fault/attributes*

One head teacher identified pupils' lack of social skills as a barrier to learning and intended to address this in her school's action research project. This issue was also influenced by her interest in the development of 'emotional intelligence'. Her view was that the heart of the problem in boys' underachievement is their lack social skills which, in turn, is the result of immaturity.

> *Or if you say 'Did you tell them they'd actually bumped into you as they walked by?' because they react quite often before they know what's going on. It's a knee jerk reaction. So quite often I say 'How about if next time you say – 'Ooh, that hurt me' and give the person a chance to say 'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realise they were doing it'. But instead of that there's this immediate knee jerk reaction 'What did you do that for.....?' and that's partly not having technique I think, but it's partly not having the emotional maturity or the social skills to deal with it. It's a reaction instead of a response.*
>
> (Head teacher, primary school)

In this excerpt the same head teacher explains how a child was using the incorrect response to a reprimand:

> *Do you know, he just didn't realise what impression he was giving and how that looked so inappropriate and how it made people cross. He was embarrassed and just didn't realise. That's the sort of thing you need to be conscious of. He didn't know, didn't have the skill. If it's something as simple as that, if you can teach a child just to look down at the floor instead of laughing, because they don't feel so embarrassed, or anything that is going to make the situation work for them so they're not going to inflame it... That's what it's about.*
>
> (Head teacher, primary school)

A secondary teacher referred to the essential differences between girls and boys. He was also influenced by his interest in learning styles and similar theoretical debates:

> *Gender is one thing that can affect people's learning style, but their ethnicity can have an influence and lots of other things as well, nature/nurture debates and all sorts of things. So you've got to look at it in that broader context too.*
>
> (Teacher, secondary school)

A Key Stage 1 teacher talked about her assessments of children as they enter school. However, she was not necessarily claiming that these are natural attributes and suggested that the children's underachievement may be a result of their interaction with others:

We found in our entry assessments that children's social skills and linguistic skills are generally lower, so for me, professionally, I'd like to try and see what's happened there. I was trying to find out why these things happen as well. It may be talking to the parents and finding a little about their pre-school background which may actually help me understand why children perhaps haven't got the confidence to speak or haven't got the skills.
(Teacher, primary school)

The connections between behaviour and socialisation were further exemplified in the problems articulated by a young secondary school teacher. Having been introduced to action research early in her initial teacher training course, this teacher claimed that this was now an in built and natural problem-solving process for her.

I've got eight boys that regularly cause problems right across the school and there's a gang mentality, they're all mates outside school. I had to teach my tutor group last year for French as well, so they saw a lot of me. Five lessons a fortnight I saw them and I wanted to create the sort of atmosphere that by looking at somebody else's work and trying to evaluate their work and identify... I didn't want to call them 'weaknesses', but to identify problem areas and things they were good at, that by setting a partner learning targets, they would hopefully in time, have someone set them for them, but in return they would actually be able to do it for themselves. So a bit of training, modelling, that sort of thing.
(Language teacher, secondary school)

2. *Their own (or teachers') lack of understanding or skills*

A large proportion of the respondents in this study recognised that learning problems were also a function of current practice and sought better ways of understanding and improving their own teaching. In an early quote in this paper a head teacher cited the improvement of teachers' understanding as her reason for becoming involved in the initiative. The data shows that this head teacher monitored her professional work for difficulties and successes '*we are trying to identify what it is that works here*'. Her Beacon School had been successful in consistently achieving equal progress in reading for both boys and girls. The problem appeared to be not knowing why this was. The expectation was that the girls would be ahead. A likelihood that the head teacher had accepted as a fact from the initial workshop presenter.

In discussing the differences between the teaching of boys and girls, the head also identified boys' behaviour as central to the teaching process. The difficulties she referred to included: boys staying on task; boys tending to be noisier; problems in the playground; problems when supply teachers are required; classes that are boy heavy and consequently develop a bad

reputation; and boys not coping well with changes in their routines. The head firmly believed, that in her school, the locus of control lay with the teachers, but that a fuller understanding of the situation would illuminate how the boys were managed and how this management resulted in achievement. This was particularly prescient as the school was now being asked, through their Beacon status, to disseminate good practice. The head's summary of the problem she faced was:

> *Why don't we have boys underachieving? And how are we going to help them* [other schools] *if we don't even know how we do it ourselves.*
> (Head teacher, primary beacon school)

The aims of their action research project were therefore to develop '*a better understanding of why we get the standards we do and whether in fact the girls are achieving as well as they should really*'.

In a similar vein another primary head identified areas where teachers can do more to help children develop their social skills:

> *If a child you've had in your class for a long period of time or you've known for a long period of time in school still surprises you with something that they think or feel then I think we still don't know what we think we know. Because I think there's a lot we don't know about what goes on between children and within children, then I think there's a lot we might do that is going to help children knowing themselves, with the skills for managing communication and relationships with others and at the same time you hope building their self-esteem because they know how well they can deal with things with the skills.*
> (Head teacher, primary school)

While in secondary schools there were some suggestions that subject teachers have not reflected sufficiently on how pupils learn:

> *it* [the Beacon Project] *provides points of contact for people who, partly because of budget restrictions, won't have that opportunity so they can go out and they can see good practice or even different practice if nothing else, as a stimulus to get them thinking about their own teaching and how pupils learn.*
> (Deputy head, secondary school)

The possibility of a subject or even individual teacher influence on the differential achievement between the genders influenced a secondary school project that was focussed on managing and monitoring data:

> *I don't think anyone had thought about seeing whether there was anything specific here, for example something that it could be pinned down to, approaching a*

particular subject or even, dare I say, problems with a particular teacher. And really you have to at times be prepared to look at things at that level if you're going to make a difference. But obviously I think it's important that we're trying to look at gender in a broader context. It's almost just one aspect of the whole learning styles debate.

(Beacon co-ordinator, secondary beacon school)

3. *The impact of external constraints or opportunities.*

As indicated above and observed by Rudduck et al. (2000), the award of Beacon School status forced teachers to consider their values, activities and responsibilities. As one Beacon co-ordinator explained:

Where this comes from obviously is we had Beacon School status just over two years ago and the school was actually pretty much told that it had to take that status and we had got concerns about more elitist aspects of it, etc., but anyway we took that on board and tried very much to adopt a co-operative model right from the start. So we got together with the three other Beacon Schools, [in the county] *....., and we've met regularly as a beacon group ever since.*

(Beacon co-ordinator, secondary beacon school)

The teachers' conceptualisation of their problem was often influenced by recent interactions with currently accepted theories of learning. For some the initial Beacon School initiative conference had been a trigger that encouraged a reorganisation of their thinking. Concepts and ideas that they had been aware of from the national press were assimilated into observations from their own environments.

I think we were aware of national trends and I think within our individual teaching we were all aware of gender imbalances or general tendencies, rather than applying to every individual. But I think it was only at that level. I don't think anyone had thought about seeing whether there was anything specific here, for example something that it could be pinned down to, approaching a particular subject

(Beacon co-ordinator, secondary beacon school)

In another school, an external judgement from Ofsted prompted the action research. This was despite the reservations of the teacher about the probity of the assessment. The teacher (SA) explained the rationale for her action research focus and her hesitations about the assessment:

SA Well it's mainly to tie in with our Ofsted Action Plan really and it's to increase the competence of children's speaking. The ultimate aim will be to an audience, a larger audience, but obviously we'll start with small groups and then progress on to class and then on to perhaps the whole school. The

reason being is that Ofsted picked out that our children weren't confident speakers and hopefully that will feed into their writing as well. But mainly it was their speaking.

I *Did you agree with the Ofsted assessment?*

SA *No, I suppose in some respects we didn't because they thought that they didn't actually speak in sentences and we would disagree with that because on a one to one they speak quite well, and with their peers. What we think it was, was mainly a confidence thing. The Ofsted team was four men and a lady and infant children seeing these huge men walking in and that would feel intimidating and not want to talk to them really. And we told them not to speak to strangers didn't we. So I mean I'm not sure. We have a thing that it was probably lack of confidence, that there was somebody else sitting in the room and they didn't want to speak*

(Teacher, primary school)

Nevertheless Ofsted is only one of the influences outside the school that she had responded to. She also identified her MA course and the national strategies for literacy and numeracy:

I think being a reflective teacher is very important, that you reflect on everything you do, working to improve your practice. Broadminded is the word I think I'd like to use, because there are lots of new initiatives coming and I think you've got your initial training behind you and some people are so 'this is the only way to teach' and you've got to follow continuing research that comes along and that perhaps it questions your beliefs and therefore you've got to be able to weigh up and make decisions yourself whether you still hold true those beliefs you had when you first came into teaching. Since I trained things have evolved so much and I know purely by doing this reading research that I'm doing for my MA that the position in reading has changed so much since I first came and I think quite often as teachers, once you come into school, you have Literacy and Numeracy and we don't see any of this research coming into school. It's on the shelves at universities and the only access we have to it is if somebody goes and does some further training. That's the only time I've had access to any professional journals, just by going in and reading myself and because I'm interested in seeing what else is going on out there and I do the best for my children because I think all teachers want to do the best for their children and I think we're reflective in the way we teach 'That doesn't work because……' and we look to ourselves first for the solutions rather than 'It's the children!'. So I think I like to be reflective, but I like to do it in a wider professional knowledge, so I'm updating my own knowledge all the time. I think a lot of teachers don't have the opportunity to do that.

(Teacher, primary school)

School and LEA development plans had also acted as triggers for action as had habits of reflection and action planning instilled in initial teacher education programmes. Planning discussions within the Beacon project shad consolidated ideas and acted as motivators. Teachers were willing to listen and accommodated the views of others. They were anxious to talk through their ideas and to identify issues that needed to be resolved.

> *But it is measuring it. How do you measure their improvement but I don't know how I would monitor that.*
> (Teacher, primary school)

Conclusions

The teachers in our study provided, first, examples of a conceptualisation of learning that links the aptitude to learn to personal characteristics of the learner. This is incontestable. Each child is different in prior experiences, current understanding, mental agility and motivation. The differences are only termed a problem when they impact disproportionally on the individual, or a larger group, or several pupils exhibit similar less effective tendencies. This, therefore, becomes viewed as a social or behavioural issue, and bringing about a change in the individual or group behaviour is expected to enhance the learning experience. The action research projects initiated by teachers with this predominant view of learning focussed on changing the pupils' personal understanding. The projects included improving pupils' skills of self evaluation, enhancing self esteem, and allowing greater peer support through different classroom settings and introducing paired working.

As the focus within these project was on changing pupil behaviour there was no direct intention by the teachers to change their practice beyond that which was necessary for the newly introduced activities. Rather the emphasis was upon becoming better informed about the needs, and often failings, of their pupils. The teacher's actions appear to fulfil the first stage requirement of Schon's (1983, 1991) cycle, 'an appreciation' although there appears to be very little action or re-appreciation. As such these projects offered opportunities for slow and gradual change in teacher's action. The benefits of this approach are, however, well recognised. The projects met the criterion of Hargreaves and Evans (1997) who argue that teachers need to be able to identify their own interests and needs. Fullan (1999) also argues that successful professional development will depend on initiatives which reflect the needs of individual teachers. The structure of these projects also resonated with Lovett and Gilmore's (2003, p.208) conclusion that making sense of authentic experiences is a basic principle of teacher development. The potential weakness of this approach is that the teachers may restrict themselves to seeing the problem as resting with the pupils. Therefore, if it is difficult to bring about change in the behaviour of pupils, then it may be that no further attempt is made to

address the problem by questioning the relationship between the problem and their own actions.

In the second group of projects, the teachers did look to themselves believing that they held the key to enabling pupil learning. The tenet was that if they, themselves, could better understand noteworthy individual approaches to learning, they would be able to manage them more competently and, hence, improve learning. One theory of learning that seemed to bolster these comments was drawn from recent debates on learning styles. The LEA had provided inset opportunities based on the neurolinguistic programming theory of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic styles of learning (see Dryden & Vos, 1994; Smith, 1998). Characteristics of learning particular to males and females had also been convincingly presented at the Beacon School network workshop. Such theories of learning chimed with many of the teachers who believed that a greater understanding of preferred learning approaches and how to respond to them would strengthen their classroom practices. Whether or not the individual differences in learning styles outweighs differences in mental agility or effort to learn is a moot point, but the teachers felt that response to the former was more within their control. Their action research projects therefore often derived from interpretation of data sets and reflection on their own teaching approaches in relation to theories on learning styles.

This group of projects met the same criteria discussed above for ownership and direction of their own professional development but also met two further principles set out by Lovett and Gilmore (2003, p.208). The teachers welcomed diversity in learning as an opportunity 'to affirm or adjust their own practice'. Additionally they worked with others on projects which 'increased the visibility of teachers' learning'. The involvement of teachers from other schools in the preparation, analysis and evaluation of the school-based projects provided a second layer of reflection which challenged the teachers and raised their awareness of the assumptions which had influenced the analysis of their project data. In effect this process introduced the 'double loop learning' discussed by Lovett and Gilmore, (2003, p.190) and the teachers were able to benefit from the experiences of their colleagues from other schools. Teachers in these circumstances were exceeding the aims of the Beacon Schools initiative with a two way flow of expertise. A potential weakness of this situation however is the caveat by Somekh (1995) referred to above, that a small group of teachers could lack certain kinds of specialist knowledge, whether methodological or substantive which would limit the value of their conclusions. This could be further exacerbated by the lack of time most teachers were able to find for wider reading. This potential difficulty was overcome by the teachers identified in the third group of projects.

In the third situation identified in our analysis of the school based projects, teachers demonstrated their own willingness to learn from the external influences that they had encountered. Their discussions of the educational issues which were central to their projects drew on sources from a community much greater than the colleagues within their local education authority. They drew on and were influenced by guidance from national organisations. They were energised by the collaborative activities offered by the Beacon School research and development project and were eager to apply ideas in their own schools and classrooms. Here many teachers had also drawn on current theories that were accessible to them and had used them to aid their conceptualisation of their own ideas of learning. Further, this had been a trigger for discussion and collaboration within and between schools. The participating teachers had begun to share terminology, ideas and experiences from a wide professional field that would explain their current practice and extend their expertise. They had identified and shared their conceptions of barriers to effective learning and their strategies for supporting learning. These findings also appear to support the observations of Elliott (2001) on the nature of the professional development engendered through action research.

This was a small investigation. Nonetheless it provided an opportunity to explore ways in which a particular type of teacher development is enhanced or constrained by teachers' own explanatory frameworks. With the introduction of Leading Edge Schools, professional development through action research networks is likely to remain a significant tool for improving learning in the UK. For the optimum impact, it may be necessary to be more explicit about the nature of the development that can be attained through this approach. This study suggests that all the teachers participating in the action research network benefitted professionally. However, there were distinct levels within this development. These were:

1. Reflection and articulation of individual needs and interests that clarified current practice and enhanced understanding.
2. The identification of authentic experiences that can be observed, analysed and adapted to improve practice.
3. Applying theoretical considerations in order to highlight and address areas for change that can be managed by the individual teacher.
4. Drawing on shared ideas, experiences, and terminology that gives authority to plans and actions for improved practice.

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LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL.

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Abstract

In the recent UK government policies that aim to raise standards at all levels of education, the drive for lifelong, independent learners has diminished in favour of prescription and consistent teaching approaches. Nonetheless, the ideal outcome of learners who understand, and take responsibility for, their own learning persists, and can be observed implicitly in policies and more explicitly in practice. This paper explores the frameworks (e.g. Vygotsky; Bruner) and processes (e.g. Tharp & Gallimore; Mercer) of independent learning in the current context. Drawing on previous research, it takes the view that independent learning occurs when pupils have a clear understanding of their own learning needs and strategies; when they are able to recognise and overcome problems in their learning and when they are encouraged to make informed decisions about the nature and conduct of their learning.

The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 24 pupils before their transition from primary to secondary schools. Pupils were asked to reflect on personal strategies and approaches to study in literacy, numeracy and science. Data were analysed in order to identify:

1. the level of responsibility pupils assume for their own learning at the end of Year 6;
2. the skills and strategies for independent learning identified by the pupils;
3. the educational relationships they had (who supported them and how);
4. pupils' perceptions of promoters and inhibitors of independent learning.

Key Words

Independent learning; educational relationships; Key Stage 2; transition

Introduction

Independent learning is an important tenet within the current policy for primary education in the UK. Although often couched in uncontentious language the government believes that primary education is about:

> *Children experiencing the joy of discovery, solving problems, being creative in writing art and music, developing their self-confidence as learners and maturing socially and emotionally.*
> (DfES, 2003: 4)

During their present span in office, the government's educational reforms began with a focus on primary education as the foundation for a pupil's educational career before turning to the restructuring of the early years of secondary schooling in order to secure and build on achievement in the primary school (DfEE/QCA, 2000). Teaching within these two phases, therefore, continues to be transformed by national strategies for literacy and numeracy and the frameworks for teaching in years 7, 8 and 9 (Joyce et al., 2002). While these policies are heavily prescriptive, the government initiatives also demand approaches to teaching and learning that engage and motivate pupils and support their active participation as independent learners (Osborn et al., 2000). The concept of independence further appears in the National Curriculum where independent learning is acknowledged as being essential to effective learning. The Primary Strategy does not refer specifically to independent learning but calls for a focus on the individual needs and abilities of the child. However, it provides a case study of effective practice which involves:

> *children themselves in thinking carefully about their own progress- so that they are able to assess themselves and work with teachers to set their own targets for improvement*
> (DfES, 2003: 31).

Within socio-constructivist theories of learning, independent activity is a key stage in the process of learning (Wood, 2002). The pupil's first attempt at self-monitoring as they attempt to 'talk themselves through' an activity is vital in helping the child move from being supported by the teacher to performing an activity unaided. Bruner (1986) identified this move as a point of 'handover' from the teacher to the child. The concept of hand-over however also highlights the complexity of the concept of independence. The essential activity of working alone is only a small part in a sequence of activities where the responsibility for the learning process moves back and forth from teacher to pupil. Tharp and Gallimore (1991) show how this sequence can be viewed as part of a cycle where hand-over takes the child from dependency on the teacher to a stage of self-monitoring within what Vygotsky termed the zone of proximal development:

> *Indeed, by asking questions and adopting other sub-routines of the adult's assistance, children gradually take over the actual structuring of the task and thereby acquire not only the performance but also the process of transfer of performance.*
> Tharp and Gallimore, 1991: 51)

Within the learning process, from this perspective, the children are not entirely dependent on the teacher; there are stages when they have to be left alone (Mercer et al., 1999). It is still the teacher who remains responsible for the learning process but the dependency of the children increases and decreases as the teacher intervenes and steps away. If, however, we recognise the shared construction of meaning that is integral to this interaction between the teacher and pupil (Wertsch, 1991), regardless of the level of dependency of the children, we have to question whether it is sensible to see any value in independent learning at all. It is possible however to resolve this tension if the learning process is seen as a sequence of episodes when the children work with the support of the teacher to identify and assimilate knowledge (scaffolding) followed by episodes of working independently to analyse (thinking about) and evaluate the learning (self-monitoring). The children have independence during the episodes of individual activity by taking responsibility for the task. Their shared understanding of the task does not reduce this responsibility and the teacher will continue to have authority over, rather than direct control, of the learning process.

This cycle of scaffolding-handover-self-monitoring is seen by many researchers as the basis for the development of 'meta-cognitive' skills (Flavell, 1977; Bruner 1996; Gipps and MacGlichrist,1999) or learning about learning. Metacognition implies understanding and taking responsibility for your own learning, selecting appropriate thinking strategies and monitoring the thinking processes. Self-monitoring requires the child to distinguish between the support they are given by the teacher and their own efforts, and also to assess their performance during the task (Broadfoot, 2001). There are many studies which show the effectiveness of meta-cognitive skills and these skills underpin the development of thinking strategies promoted by the National Strategies (Gipps and MacGilchrist, 1999). Metacognition prevents the child from becoming a passive learner entirely dependent on the teaching which ironically can happen in classrooms where children spend much of their time working alone (Gipps et al., 1999; Alexander, 1997; Galton et al., 1999a). Within many of these studies it was found that although they spent the majority of their time working alone, the dependency of the children on the teacher prevented their activity being described as independent.

This paper aims to clarify the extent to which pupils, at the end of their primary experience (aged 11 years), have assumed responsibilities and attitudes that are aligned with the independent learning that will ease their transition to secondary school. The view we take of independent learning within this project is therefore not to focus on children working alone but rather to explore their

understanding of learning or meta-cognition. We identify ways in which pupils are involved in the decisions affecting their learning and the extent to which they have opportunities to make their own choices. We probe whether and how they select their own learning strategies and also their understanding of what supports and what inhibits their learning.

Methodology

The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 24 pupils before their transition from primary to secondary schools. Interviews were carried out with Year 6 pupils in four different primary schools within the same local education authority (LEA). The schools were selected as representative of medium sized, mixed ability primary schools employing a typical range of teaching approaches and activities. Six pupils in each school were interviewed individually. One boy and one girl were selected for us by the class teachers from three levels of achievement within the recent national tests (SATs) for mathematics, English and science (levels 3, 4 and 5, the tests are norm referenced and level 4 is designed as the national average). Each interview lasted approximately 30-40 minutes and was audio-taped and transcribed. The data from the pupil interviews were complemented by field-notes taken during and after visits to the schools; by notes from discussions with the class teachers and the senior manager of each school; and by discussions with local education authority advisers to the schools.

In the interviews we asked pupils to reflect on personal strategies and approaches to study used in each of literacy, numeracy and science and to describe and discuss with us:

1. their general views of school; the work they did in the core subjects; the type of activities they did;
2. their view of themselves as learners; their strategies for learning; how they coped with home-work and problems;
3. how they assessed and evaluated the work they did; how they attempted to improve their work;
4. their expectations of secondary school and what they knew of the curriculum.

We analysed the data, through a progressive process of coding, to identify:

- the level of responsibility pupils assume for their own learning at the end of Year 6;
- the skills and strategies for independent learning identified by the pupils;
- the educational relationships they had (who supported them and how);
- pupils' perceptions of promoters and inhibitors of independent learning.

Findings

We found that all the 24 children interviewed were able to talk easily about their learning. It became clear that they did not believe that they had any choice or control of the activities within the core subjects and only a limited choice in the methods that they used in their work. Despite this the children's responses suggested that they recognised that they had to take responsibility for their own learning and that they were all able to describe the strategies that they could use. They recognised who it was that supported their learning in school and at home and many had clear views on how effective this support was. They were also aware of aspects of school life which enhanced or interfered with the learning process. Without exception the pupils had anxieties about the move to secondary school, but nevertheless most were excited at the prospect.

Pupils' understanding of content and choices in their learning

All the children were able to describe what it was they did in the three core subjects of maths, English and science. The more able children confidently articulated detailed and technical descriptions of their activities as they used phrases and expression from the curriculum frameworks such as *'explanation texts and instruction texts'; 'in science you've got habitats and micro-habitats'; 'I find non-fiction harder'; 'fractions, decimals, we do problem solving'*. The children whose achievement was lower were still able to discuss the content of their work; they used developing technical vocabularies; and demonstrated their understanding of the content of activities: *'so we kind of learn the basics of the stories, the middle, ending and that, and the opening'; 'we've been doing growing plants in different places'; 'we get sheets with problems on them'*.

The children discussed the choices that they have in what they learn. In all 24 interviews the children described how the activities in the core subjects were given to them by their teacher, none of the children made references to any negotiation of topics or of having to select or choose their activities. We did find that some children, approximately a quarter of the group, expressed a level of dissatisfaction with the situation. Below are sections of the transcripts which highlight the differences between the children who appeared accepting of this situation and those who expressed some frustration.

Acceptance	Frustration
Girl (pupil no. 24) *Well we've got these books. I can't remember what they're called, but we work with them and at the beginning of the lesson our teacher gives out equipment and maths things and we've got a whiteboard, and then he writes a bit about what we're meant to do in the book and then we do the work in the book. But sometimes we have investigations and he writes the investigation on the board and then we have to do it, find out and*	Boy (pupil no. 1) *I had this teacher and she's the one that explained it and then said 'Here we go, do it, you've got a deadline'. And she was a proper bossy boots. I don't want to mention her name.* *... the teacher will often say 'I'm going to put some sums on the board and you've got exactly half an hour to do them... it makes me kind of think 'Oh no, I don't really have a choice'*

write what we've found out and like a conclusion. Girl (pupil no. 5) *Well we have these books and then like they can give us a page to do and they tell us what to do in case we don't understand and then if we understand we can go ahead and do it but if we don't we can just wait for the teacher to explain it.* Girl (pupil no. 12) *There'd be some sums up on the board and we have to do the answers and sometimes we write down our times tables in our book*	Girl (pupil no. 22) *Well I like some English, like the explanations texts and the instruction texts, but I don't like stories that much because I find it hard. If they set a title I find it hard to imagine quite quickly. I have to be able to set my own title, otherwise I find it hard.* Girl (no. 6) *Well sometimes you've got to work out how you do it and how you did the experiment, but you don't really know why you did it. You just do it.*

The children's learning strategies

All the children were able to describe more than one learning strategy that they used in a range of situations. In particular they were asked how they cope when they were 'stuck' with their work and how they coped with their homework. This collective knowledge represented a sophisticated and complex array of strategies available to each group of pupils. The following examples from the data illustrate the range of strategies identified by the pupils. In the first example the learning process is described in terms of strategies related to **understanding.** One of the girls (pupil no. 23) knew that she needed to 'get it' straightaway:

> *Well, arithmetic is like easy, but sometimes when we do stuff that we just start or we haven't really focused on a lot yet, I sometimes find that hard unless I get it straightaway.*

One of the boys (pupil no. 19) referred to his failure to understand in terms of 'hard to work out' and knew that **thinking** could be a strategy:

> *I find it sort of hard to work out things and lots of people say to think outside the box, but I don't know how you do that.*

A third strategy was **listening** as expressed in this interview with another boy (pupil no. 3): ('I' is the interviewer.)

I	*So what do you think you can do to become a good learner? Can you become one?*
no. 3	*It's something you can achieve yourself.*
I	*What do you need to do to achieve it?*
no. 3	*Listen.*
I	*Anything else?.....or is listening the most important thing?*
no. 3	*It's the most important thing.*

Another term used was **remembering.** Here, one of the boys (pupil no. 2) explains a strategy, **note taking**, which helps him remember:

I	*When you're trying to learn something well what do you do?*
no. 2	*I just stick with what the teacher says and try and remember from that really.*
I	*If you really wanted to remember something or learn something?*

no. 2 *Take notes.*
I *More than you would normally?*
no. 2 *We do usually take notes. We go in the red room down there and watch a video of the Mary Rose or something and the Isle of Wight or something like that and we take notes in our planning book and then we'll steadily move them into our literacy book*

Another boy (pupil no. 20) knows that he prefers **learning by doing**:

I *What don't you like about English?*
no. 20 *There's not many practical things because in maths you've got shape and everything like that and in science you've got habitats, micro-habitats and so you can actually go out and do things but with English it's mostly sitting down looking at a few pieces of paper and writing down. Not enough practical things.*
I *Do you think you prefer learning by doing?*
no. 20 *Yes, I learn more by doing.*

One of the girls (no. 4) describes two contrasting strategies, **guessing** and **applying previously learnt knowledge:**

no. 4 *Sometimes I just guess and get lucky.*
I think of myself as a good learner because I always get my work done and my homework in.
I *So that's the reason you're a good learner. That you do the tasks they want you to do on time and that sort of stuff. Is there anything else that makes you a good learner?*
no. 4 *I just listen to my teacher and just think of what I could do and I just think of what other teachers have taught me and compare it to my teacher I've got now instead.*

There were instances when formal strategies, such as **look, cover, write and check,** were described as in this example from one of the girls (no. 11)

I *How do you try and learn your spellings?*
no. 11 *Look, cover, write, check.*
I *So that's what the teacher has told you to do?*
no. 11 *Yes.*
I *You look at the word, cover it up, write it down and check if it's right.*
no. 11 *Yes.*
I *And does that work for you? You're getting better at spelling?*
no. 11 *Yes.*

Pupils' responsibility for their learning.

Many of these strategies were described within the context of the classroom where the pupils were very dependent on their teacher. However many of the children also described these strategies within the context of working alone. Below are examples of these different contexts described by two pupils.

Supported by the teacher	**Supporting yourself**
Boy (pupil no. 2) *I Did you work with anybody on this?* *J In some tasks we worked in partners but some we had to do individually.* *I Anybody else help you?* *J Not really. If you're stuck you'd go up and ask Mr. D**.*	Girl (pupil no. 22) *I What is that makes some children good learners?* *F I think they have to listen and think for themselves and think outside the question. So if you like just read the question and think outside it kind of and realise what you could use from other things that you've learnt to answer the question and stuff.*

I How do you know it's a good piece of work? *J We get a class point from Mr. D**. He marks them and probably I'd be impressed with my work.* *I You yourself?* *J Yes. Before he marked it.* *I So you knew something about it was good. What makes it good?* *J The standard, punctuation. Good standard of whatever, just like writing.* *I How do you know how to improve your work?* *J I don't know. Just try harder, just kind of whatever – ask the teacher and he'll show you how to make it better.*	*I Why are some children better at learning than others? Is it because they just don't do those things?* *F I don't know really. I don't think it's because they don't do those things. I think everyone can learn as well as everyone else, but I just think that some people learn better at other subjects than others because they like it better than others.* *I If you're trying to learn something really well what would you do?* *F Well I'd kind of focus on that for a bit and try and get it in my head.* *I What kinds of things do you do to get it in your head?* *F Well I try to remember it. Like in English, in the SATs we were talking about all the discussion texts and we had little pictures to remember what you do and I tried to make a picture so that I could keep it in my head to remember it.*

Our discussions with the pupils suggested that they were not involved in negotiations or decisions over the content of the curriculum with the core subjects and that they reported only a few opportunities to choose the methods that they employed in their work. Despite this, when asked how they learnt, or what made a good learner, all the children would refer to the effort an individual needed to make, and spoke of this in terms of their own responsibility. The overall attitude to learning remained positive, although there were a few exceptions. The data reported in this section shows the range of views expressed by individual children in relation to the responsibility and the action required from children in general if they are to be effective learners.

In this discussion the girl (pupil no. 4) emphasises the need to listen and identifies what she should do if she doesn't understand. It is clear from her comments that she believes that she needs to remain aware of whether she has understood and to manage any difficulties proactively:

I *When you're trying to learn something well what do you do?*
no. 4 *I just really really listen and if I haven't understood I either go up to him or leave it and go home and ask my mum or dad and if my mum can pay for a tutor maybe so I could understand it, especially with my maths. That's what I did because I wasn't doing very well.*
I *So it was you who asked for a tutor was it because you were worried about it and needed help?*
no. 4 *Yes.*
I *Do you ever ask your friends for help?*
no. 4 *Sometimes.*

Many of the children expressed similar views. Here one of the boys (no. 2) refers to the value of sustained effort:

I *What is it that makes someone a better learner than another in your year?*
no. 2 *The most effort they put in probably to their work. There are some people that chat and they just don't do much work and they leave it to the last ten minutes of the lesson to try and do all their work. There are other people who just work all the way through the lesson and little by little they get it done really.*

A few of the children suggested that they thought being a good learner was in some way inherent or a natural trait. These kind of comments were less common than those above in relation to effort and personal responsibility. One of the girls (no. 4) has referred to another pupil in her class:

I *J**** thinks she's quite good at maths. She's a friend of yours isn't she.*
no. 4 *Yes, she is better than me. She's quite snappy.*
I *Quite quick.*
no. 4 *Yes.*
I *Would you ask her for help or not expect to understand her answers if she told you?*
no. 4 *If I haven't heard or don't quite understand I do ask her, yes.*

This boy (no. 19) explains his own success as 'natural':

I *What is that makes you a good learner when you progress well?*
no. 19 *I don't know really. It just sort of comes naturally. I find it easier to learn things.*
I *Can anything stop you learning in maths?*
no. 19 *Sometimes if I'm less confident or a bit slow sometimes.*
I *What do you think it is that makes people generally in your year be better learners than others?*
no. 19 *I think it's all to do with confidence really. If they're confident with their work. Others aren't so confident.*

Pupils' views of who provides support

All the children interviewed easily identified others who helped them with their learning. We did not have to prompt the children to describe who it was that supported them, we were able to wait until the child referred to a teacher, parent or other child as in the following transcripts. This girl (pupil no. 4) refers to her **teacher** and offers some insight into the effective teacher:

I *So you think about your learning as you go along.*
no. 4 *Yes.*
I *What is it that makes someone a better learner than another in your year?*
no. 4 *I think it depends on how the teacher teaches you, to see how strict or kind or nice they are or if they're pleased with your work. Then you can actually produce more nice work and they'll be quite kind about it.*
I *So you think that's encouraging, that the kind and sympathetic teachers get better work out of you than the strict ones?*
no. 4 *Yes.*
I *What do you think about strict teachers?*
No. 4 *I think strict teachers only are strict teachers because when the children are being teached* (sic) *they know what's right and wrong. They get used to it after a while and when they move up to their next class or something they will know that if they do something wrong they'll get told off for it. So it's just things like that.*

When asked about his homework this boy (pupil no. 1) refers to his **mother**, he also appraises the level of help received:

no. 1 *Yes. My mum usually reads through my stories.*
I *Does she help you?*
no. 1 *Not really. Sometimes I do it on the computer and that's quite good and that's how I get all the spellings right.*

On the other hand, one girl (pupil no 5.) talks about her **parents** in a different role:

What I like about school is that instead of learning at home you can learn somewhere else so your parents don't have to teach you and you can learn more because you go up in different grades, instead of learning hard things in one go. So you go up and it makes it easier for you.

Brothers and sisters are also widely mentioned as in this example from one of the boys (no. 14):

Sometimes my mum helps me. Sometimes my brother helps me, it depends. If it's maths homework then usually it'll be my brother or my sister who's helping me and if it's like literacy home-work then it'll be my mum.

Many of the children refer to the support that they received from their **peers.** Here are examples from two boys (pupils 13 and 15 respectively):

no. 13 *I ask the person sitting next to me, ... we have groups depending on how good you are at learning, how good you are at Maths and that, Yes, I tend to ask the person next to me.*

no. 15 *You have a literacy partner and a numeracy partner, so you work with some of them some of the time, and then sometimes you get in a group of four or five or something and then work it out together, but sort of usually do it on your own.*
I *So if you need help, you help each other or do you ask the teacher.*
no. 15 *Yes, we ask the teacher, or if a friend has already done that question, you ask them for help.*

Factors which enhance or inhibit learning

Although all the children were able to offer insight into the learning process and all were able to comment on their learning and the support that they received, it was not always schoolwork that they associated with learning when we discussed their thoughts concerning transfer to secondary school. The transcripts below show the range of concerns the pupils discussed revealing very different priorities for the four pupils. The comments do however reveal an understanding of the factors which enhance or inhibit learning.

The **threat of violent behaviour** from peers was the most common concern as expressed somewhat dramatically by this girl (pupil no. 18):

I *What are you looking forward to at secondary school? Are you looking forward to going to C*** School*
no. 18 *No, not really. Because last year someone from downstairs called S*** has a friend of hers who she calls her sister and I got beaten up by her and her friends are in C*** School so I'm a bit worried I'm going up. Every time my sister comes home, because she's at C***, she goes 'Everyone in Yr. 8 hates you' so I'm worried about going up in case they beat me up and everything. My brother is in Yr. 5 now and he's going up the year after me and he got pushed into a river and cracked his head and it was S***'s friend who done it. It was her boyfriend. And I've got beaten up all the time, so I'm a bit worried.*

Another boy (pupil no 1) was also worried about **bullies** and knew it would affect his learning:

but knowing that most secondary schools have loads of bullies in them, I think if I get distracted I won't learn so well because in my old school as I got bullied more and more my work began to go down and my reputation.

The **different resources** available at the secondary schools had excited some of the children, particularly the science equipment. This boy (pupil no. 2) was a little mistaken but nevertheless was one of many who spoke of the anticipated excitement of science laboratories:

> *You're going to get things like petrol and all that and play with it and experiment with it. And practical things like that. It's going to be different because they've got labs there. They've got better things probably for the school because everyone uses it.*

Opportunities for more **social activity** arising from the different classroom structure were anticipated by one girl (no. 6):

> *no. 6* *The school is much bigger. And you don't stay in one classroom during the day. You have to walk round.*
> *I* *Will that be a good thing or bad thing?*
> *no. 6* *I think it will be a good thing because while you're walking round you could see your friends quickly and go back to your classroom.*

Synthesis

Our findings provide an insight to pupils' perceptions of the nature of the learning process. Without exception the children saw it as their responsibility to work hard in order to learn. As with Jeffrey's study of three classes of Year 5 and Year 6 pupils in 1999 and 2000, we too found the children to be 'aware and articulate' when discussing learning. The insights that children presented, if taken collectively, shows us what depth of understanding could be drawn upon in school activities.

However, Jeffrey found that teachers did not utilise such a resource in their evaluation of their teaching:

> *Although our research found learners to be aware and articulate, we did not find much evidence of teachers incorporating learners' perspectives in an evaluation of their learning and teaching.*
> (Jeffrey, 2003: 501-2).

And we can confirm that such perspectives did not appear to be used in the planning of activities for our pupils. Some of our pupils, like those in McCallum et al.'s (2000) study, would have preferred greater choice and less dependency. But, the majority of pupils were not able to recognise any independence they were given, and while skilled teachers work to provide a varied curriculum experience, they are limited by prescribed approaches and testing. However, more overt acknowledgement of pupils' choices, when they occur, might give pupils a greater sense of individuality, engagement and control over their own learning.

The range of learning strategies presented by the pupils in our study complements and confirms some of the findings of the McCallum et al. (2000) study. From the excerpts above it can be suggested that pupils as young as 10 accept responsibility for their own learning and have identified preferred ways of learning. Learning strategies seem to have been acquired instinctively from different sources: teachers, parents, siblings, peers. Metacognition is clearly evident in the more able pupils, although it is rarely recognised as such. Explicit emphasis, sharing and modelling of learning strategies in the

classroom and at home might also enable pupils to understand and positively develop their personal skills for organizing and structuring their learning.

At the end of their primary school experience, pupils anticipate greater responsibility and choice in the secondary school. They demonstrate a range of priorities as they look forward to progression. Some have concerns about, for example, increased bullying; others are excited by differences in learning opportunities and the possibility of a diverse curriculum with real studios, games equipment and laboratories. These differences require different responses from teachers. The enthusiasm for learning generated by anticipated variety and change is powerful. This perception is grounded in reality; the fear of bullying is (for the most part) exaggerated.

Such findings question why government policies urge pupils to take responsibility for their learning when increasing legislation has restricted classroom choice. As Reddiford (1993) points out the discussion of the desirability of negotiating the curriculum with students was a 1960s and 1970s debate which was suspended with the overwhelming scale of curriculum change that arrived with the National Curriculum. The trend of an imposed curriculum continued and as Pollard (2000) observed risked alienating children from a deeper commitment to learning.

We would suggest that perhaps this is a debate that needs to begin again in the light of a growing recognition of the need for learning to be seen as a life-long activity. These issues are timely because of the changing view of the curriculum presented in the Primary Strategy (DfES, 2003: 12) where teachers are encouraged to 'think actively about how they would like to develop and enrich the experience they offer their children'. Such discourse could also echo the conclusion by Galton et al. (1999b & 2003) that there may be a need for 'discontinuity' in the curriculum for pupils as they transfer between schools.

If we attempt to identify the view of the learner embodied in the comments of the children we see that the dominant conception of learning resonates with a social-constructivist view of learning. In this respect our findings are again similar to that of McCallum et al. (2000). The children recognise their own responsibility for learning, but agree about the need for direction and guidance from the teacher or 'more capable other'. They see the potential for support of their peers; parents; siblings as well as their teachers. (By implication we could conclude that, like the teachers in the studies discussed by Gipps and MacGilchrist (1999), the teachers in our study adopt or endorse a predominantly child centred and constructivist approach.)

We therefore ask, do the children, themselves, have a greater understanding of shared and independent learning than the policy makers who promote independent learning? Would it be more

worthwhile to herald independent learning as one stage in the learning cycle? As Alexander reminds us of Bruner's conclusions:

> *knowledge is not exclusively personal or inter-subjective or relative, and that it is the teachers' task to help children grasp the difference between personal knowledge [...] and 'what is taken to be known' by the culture*
> (Alexander, 2000: 556).

We found this shared understanding and were impressed by the children's grasp of the educational relationships they had. This understanding interlocked with the children's understanding of the content of their learning and the strategies they used to develop meta-cognitive skills (Bullock & Wikeley, 2004). The current interest among teachers in learning styles, thinking skills and multiple intelligences (Krechevsky and Seidel, 2001) provides a useful context in which to discuss ways of applying the meta-cognitive skills that children have instinctively acquired. We would conclude however that these skills are constrained by the pupils' lack of opportunity to apply them in selecting activities and study methods in a meaningful way. As such it would appear that the activities that the children discussed with us do not meet Alexander's requirement for learning, and teaching children to learn about learning. He claims that such meta-cognition is only effective where:

> *the idea ceases to be a collection of words to be batted back and forth [...] and becomes something with which the child can actively engage.*
> (Alexander, 2000: 430)

We wish, therefore, to support the call within the Primary Strategy for identifying individual needs: *every teacher knows that truly effective learning and teaching focuses on individual children* (DfES, 2003: 31). The call for more responsibility and enjoyment for pupils in their learning is timely.

Notes

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APPENDIX 1

Kate Bullock Full Publication List

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APPENDIX 2

Evidence of Peer Approbation

Award Number: R 000 23 2684

Date: 18 June 2001

E·S·R·C
ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL

Dr S Martin
Dept of Education
University of Bath
Bath
BA2 7AY

Dear Dr Martin

I am writing to report the outcome of the evaluation of your research project. An overall grade on the scale Outstanding, Good, Problematic or Unacceptable is assigned to each Report. Your project has been graded as Good: 'Good quality research making a useful contribution to the development of the subject. A Good grade indicates a project whose research activities and contribution is fully commensurate with the level of award, approach and subject area, and which has addressed its major objectives.'

I have enclosed the unattributed comments of the rapporteurs together with their grades, which we hope you will find constructive and useful.

The ESRC does not publish the details of project evaluations and they remain confidential to the Council and its Boards. We may, however, publish reports containing general details of the outcome of completed research awards together with their grades; these reports are likely to be made available to a wider audience. We will lodge your End of Award Report with the British Library where it will be available for public access, as a record of the research you have undertaken with ESRC funds.

We are keen to maintain records of the output from ESRC-funded research. The staff of our publication's database will be contacting you periodically to enable you to keep us up to date on the published output of your research. We would appreciate your co-operation in this matter.

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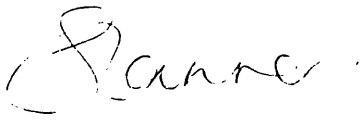
I must apologise for the delay in feeding back to you on your grade and thank you for your co-operation with ESRC's evaluation. I hope that it has been of use to you and your work. If there are any points you wish to raise in response to the evaluation, please put them in writing to me not later than four weeks from the date of this letter.

Yours Sincerely



Suzanne Tanner
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ASSESSMENT OF END OF AWARD REPORT

Learning from GCSE Coursework

R000222684

A

GRADE: GOOD

Activities and achievements

The researchers have met their obligations in terms of conducting the research according to the proposal though the emphasis is more strongly on learning than on the 'teaching and learning' indicated in the original objectives. This is not a significant difficulty though as teacher response is clearly documented and I am satisfied that the work carried out has been able to address the spirit of the aims and objectives fully.

The body of data collected is substantial for this relatively modest project and may well yield further results of interest.

The analysis of the data would appear to have been carefully conducted and checked from a number of viewpoints.

The main achievement of the research is the systematic attempt to gain insight into the activities and processes taking place under the label of coursework in a range of contexts through the direct involvement of teacher researchers. It clearly indicated the strong role of assessment in curricular definition and that the focus on achieving high marks to assist students and schools to meet their targets is all pervasive. As the project team states in the summary of research results "Whilst the *status quo* is not likely to change in the short term, the study suggests that it is appropriate to consider redressing the balance so that greater attention is given to the process of coursework, not only as an end in itself, but also in enhancing the product.' The concern being expressed is supported by the findings presented, namely that a real opportunity is being lost. The study suggests a number of practical ways in which this might be redressed, not least the refocussing of the assessment and the professional development of teachers.

Highlights

The most significant aspect of the research is simply the fact that the research plan has been conducted successfully, thus providing evidence of what is taking place in coursework with respect to its potential for contribution for the lifelong learning skills of independent learning, critical thinking and creativity.

Dissemination

(A)

The researchers have engaged and are engaging in a range of dissemination activities, largely within the higher education community but also including headteachers local to the proposers' institution.

Audiences

The reporting of the findings is helpful and clear though it is important to extend this to include targeted dissemination to QCA and Award Bodies as well as to teacher and HEI's more widely.

The English, Welsh and NI education departments should be made aware of the findings in policy terms.

Further Research

In their report the researchers suggest possibilities for further research at a number of levels. Each of the suggestions is realistic and important. The role of the subject and teacher culture are significant areas of potential in widening the research. The underlying theme which has potential for making real difference in education, if it can be successfully addressed, is how assessment models can be devised and assignments written and supported to allow the development of (lifelong) learning skills whilst addressing examination requirements.

Additional Comments

None

(B)

Assessment of ESRC Award no. 000222684

Learning from GCES Coursework: Fostering independent learning, critical thinking and creativity?

Activities and achievements

This project was underpinned by a sound theoretical basis together with a substantial bibliography. References were made to material on this topic from 1981 (Entwistle) through to 2000 (Koh and Rawlings). The team also made use of research which they had carried out previously. The report clearly indicates that the team had drawn on a wide range of sources for their arguments which were clearly made and were instrumental in drawing up their final objectives.

The methodology used to test their objectives qualitatively were sound. A timetable, having been set out in the application, was adhered to and the flowchart in appendix 3 clearly indicates the logical steps taken in the development of the methodology. The schools which were selected for the experiment shows a realistic mix with rolls ranging from 600 to 1400, all mixed schools apart from a boys school and they were drawn from a range of locations. Stratified random sampling was used in each school to choose six students, the criteria being gender equality, level of attainment and socio-economic group. The team successfully involved a senior member of the teaching staff from each of the sample schools in the research team. Each of these teachers was involved in teaching GCSE coursework and this added a significant dimension of real experience to the team. The schools also gained considerably from these members of staff being involved directly with the research especially in furthering the development of teaching and learning in coursework in their schools.

Other than a brief paragraph, stating that qualitative data analysis software was used in the analysis of the data, the report has expressed the findings from this analysis in literal form.

Two difficulties were noted in the collection of data and analysis of the interviews. The first was the problem both parents and students had in differentiating learning from coursework and learning from normal class teaching. Could this be because both groups see learning purely as an exercise in academic development? The second is the mismatch between the teacher's perception of communicating coursework requirements and the student's understanding of what is required. The team have responded to this latter problem in their report.

The report clearly identifies each objective and discusses the results pertaining to that objective. I agree that the team realised their objectives. The presentation of the main findings for each objective in a 'box' together with a commentary was most helpful. It was significant, especially with current trends, that everyone considered that coursework produced a better learning environment and that it encouraged independent learning. The team then put forward their implications of the research for two groups - teachers and their managers and Examining Bodies/Groups and policy makers.

The research team had the network of schools with whom they work to use as research contacts obviously only choosing a small fraction of these for their sample. The remaining schools ought to be made aware of the research and its findings.

The main way in which this research can be promulgated is through presentations, papers, a book and possible in-service courses and most of this is already occurring or else envisaged.

(B)

The team was aware of the ethical and confidentiality issue from the outset and having discussed this matter decided to use the BERA code of ethics. They also did not invite students to attend the validation conference in case this might compromise confidentiality.

Highlights

- Working collegially with the teacher-researchers to determine indicators for the constructs;
- All participants consider coursework gives a better learning environment but that current pressures on teachers and students to improve attainment/league tables for the former and the need to get a GCSE grade for the latter means that the ideals of developing CCI through coursework is now subservient to these pressures;
- The benefits gained by teachers from discussing their work from a broad philosophical point of view rather than everyday practicalities;
- The development of a group of senior teachers into researchers who now had a much wider perspective on their work.

Dissemination

The dissemination proposed is sound. In-service courses of a workshop nature would be beneficial. I trust that a copy of the report will be sent to the Secretary of State at the DfEE. Might I suggest that that the British Journal for Educational Studies (BJES) might be interested in a paper on this topic. One of the Joint Editors is Prof. G Walford, Dept. of Educational Studies, University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY.

Audiences

GTC and ATEE the latter for eastern European countries especially who are now beginning to introduce coursework into their curricula.

Further Research

The team has identified a considerable amount of further research to follow on from their present work with which I concur. I would think that an additional area of research might be looking into the type of coursework carried out in each subject, what type of work is more or less likely to develop CCI. Certainly some of the coursework that I have seen set, leaves little room for the student to be creative or to undertake some independent learning.

Additional comments

I consider this research to be extremely valuable in the present climate. I believe it has highlighted a real concern which many teachers and educationalists have about the current emphasis on increasing attainment and the impact of league tables on teaching strategies within the schools.

I warmed to the sentiments expressed in the paper given to the Suffolk Middle School Headteachers because I believe this put the research into a broader context. It raised the issue of whether or not current teaching strategies develop skills only and will not lead to developing understanding of the subject matter. In my experience standards have risen in Key Stage 2 because the teachers now teach with the examinations in mind. This is paralleled by the experience of the team in coursework where the teachers and the students are more interested in getting the right grade for the work, each for their own reasons, rather than developing those qualities in the students such as creativity, independent learning and critical thinking. I do not consider the present methodologies will lead to the production of a future workforce 'capable of advanced learning, knowledge creation and creativity leap-frogging' (Koh, 2000).

There is ample evidence from the work done by the former Assessment of Performance Unit (DES) that when taught skill acquisition only, students are not able to solve problems which are non-standard. In addition there was much evidence to show that group working in allowed the students to produce work which was of higher ability than would have been the case if they had been working on their own. Interaction between the members of the group developed all three indicators which have been researched in this project.

I would therefore strongly support the views of the team that teachers should return to the original aims of GCSE coursework rather than maximising student attainment.

Research Quality

Good.

edskkb@bath.ac.uk

From: Tracey Bretag [Tracey.Bretag@unisa.edu.au]
Sent: 18 January 2006 02:03
To: edskkb@bath.ac.uk
Subject: RE: Citing your 2004 paper

Thanks so much, Kate. All the best with your ongoing work (I'll keep a lookout for future papers...)

Kind regards,

Tracey.

From: edskkb@bath.ac.uk [mailto:edskkb@bath.ac.uk]
Sent: Tuesday, 17 January 2006 7:43 PM
To: Tracey Bretag
Subject: RE: Citing your 2004 paper

Thanks for your interest in the paper. I'd be delighted for you to cite it.
Best wishes
Kate

From: Tracey Bretag [mailto:Tracey.Bretag@unisa.edu.au]
Sent: 17 January 2006 07:04
To: k.k.bullock@bath.ac.uk
Subject: Citing your 2004 paper

Dear Dr Bullock,

I recently came across your paper entitled: Educational relationships and dialogues between students and their personal tutors (Paper presented at the *British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*, Manchester Metropolitan University, September 2004) and would like to cite it in a paper that I had reviewed by the journal *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* ("Negotiating, connecting and learning: Making learning contracts part of assessment").

I noticed that you particularly asked that authors do not cite the paper without permission, and so I am seeking that permission here. If there is another version of the paper that you'd prefer cited, I'd appreciate if you could let me know how I might obtain a copy.

Thanks for considering this request.

Kind regards,

Tracey.

Dr Tracey Bretag
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Managing Communication in Business
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University of South Australia
Tel: (08) 8302 0224

edskkb@bath.ac.uk

From: E.A.Mackie@Bradford.ac.uk
Sent: 11 April 2006 12:10
To: k.k.bullock@bath.ac.uk
Subject: BERA 2004 Draft Paper

Dear Kate

I am a third year undergraduate on the Social Work course at the University of Bradford. The final module of the course entails carrying out a short social research project with a 8,000 word submission. I am looking at the '...significance of the student / personal tutor relationship to the learning experience of social work students'.

During my literature search I found the paper you presented to BERA in September 2004, and seek your permission to cite from it in my research.

Look forward to hearing from you.

Many thanks

Elaine

Elaine A Mackie
e.a.mackie@bradford.ac.uk

edskkb@bath.ac.uk

From: Charlotte Davies [charlotte2davies@btinternet.com]
Sent: 13 April 2006 12:08
To: k.k.bullock@bath.ac.uk
Subject: Educational Relationships...

Please may I site your draft BERA conference paper from 2004 in my PGCE assignment on target setting?

Thanks,

C Davies

edskkb@bath.ac.uk

From: Judith Williams [judithmarie1963@hotmail.com]
Sent: 20 April 2006 19:58
To: K.K.Bullock@bath.ac.uk
Subject: Research

Hello Kate,

My name is Judith Williams and I work at Aylesbury College, Bucks as an Early Years tutor. I am currently studying towards my Cert Ed and would like to cite some of your resaearch in one of my assignments.

The research I would like to cite is

Educational relationships and dialogue between students and their tutors

and

Personal learning planning. Can tutoring improve pupils learning?

I look forward to your reply.

Judith

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edskkb@bath.ac.uk

From: JWilliams [JWilliams@aylesbury.ac.uk]
Sent: 24 April 2006 13:57
To: k.k.bullock@bath.ac.uk
Subject: Research

Hello Kate,

I contacted you last week to ask permission to cite some of your work in my Cert Ed assignments. At the time I had managed to get copies of 'Educational relationships and dialogues between students and their personal tutors' and 'Using research as a process of reflection' 2 papers that you presented to BERA.

I was wondering if you could let me know how I can access the research you did for both papers as I have to look at the methodology involved in collecting research in relation to tutorials in FE.

Thank you in advance

Judith

Judith Williams
Early Years Lecturer
Tel. 01296 588624

TES
Times Educational Supplement
24 April 2006

In Brief

Geoff Barton
Published: 08 October 2004

Whose Learning? The role of the personal tutor

By Kate Bullock and Felicity Wikeley; Open University Press £16.99

I'm often wary of books about life in schools written by people on the perimeters, but this wise and timely publication by two lecturers in university education departments is an exception.

Many schools are rethinking the role of the tutor. Tempted by the logic of replacing daily tutor time with electronic registering, we are wondering whether that 15 to 20 minutes each morning is money well spent.

This book provides one of the most lucid, contemporary evaluations of the tutor's role I've encountered. It repositions the tutor as someone who helps students know what to learn, how to learn and, crucially, to "know" themselves as learners. It has a good mix of theory and practical guidance.

It warns against over-dependence on the learning styles obsession (so what if students have nine types of intelligence? No single lesson will cater for all of them) and illustrates the tutor's powerful role in making connections between subjects and areas of knowledge. A fascinating, stimulating read.

GEOFF BARTON Geoff Barton is headteacher at King Edward VI School, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

APPENDIX 3

Pan London Response

PAN-LONDON 14-19 LEARNER OFFER

Response to the DfES Consultation

We fully support the measures set out in this document which, we believe, will have a positive impact in furthering lifelong learning for young people in the capital. The evidence for this affirmation is drawn from our recent research into ways of supporting young people's learning through personal learning planning and personal tutoring.

However, we feel that the document would be strengthened by more explicit emphasis on the role of educational relationships in supporting on-going individual learning rather than limiting these to times of transition. In particular, we would give more stress to the importance of a universal entitlement to a one-to-one educational relationship which transcends traditional subject boundaries and transition points. Our evidence for this is set out below:

- Section 1.2.4 comments on the 'differences between the attainment of particular groups of students'. Our research (Bullock & Wikeley, 2000) shows that lower achieving boys benefit more from a one-to-one personal tutorial than their peers. However, the one-to-one session needs to be a universal entitlement; otherwise it becomes seen as a remedial activity and its impact is diminished.
- Section 2.1.3 propounds the sharing of 'high aspirations and expectations' between adults and young people and finding flexible ways of adapting to individual learning needs. Our research shows that most young people already have high expectations but often need individualised support in bringing these to reality. The complexity of learning needs to be acknowledged and a personal tutor can help students know what to learn, know how to learn and to know themselves as learners (Bullock & Wikeley, 2004).
- Section 2.1.4 addresses 'support and guidance' at key decision making points and the need for 'teachers, personal advisors and other adults' to understand the available options. Again, our research would suggest that it is more important for young people to personalise and understand the processes of learning than to make irrevocable, long-term choices relating to specific pathways.
- Section 2.1.6 expresses a vision of compacts between businesses and schools or colleges. Whilst applauding this, we know that the reality of such intentions is often disappointing for individual students unless consistently supported by a one-to-one educational relationship (Bullock, Jamieson & Wikeley, 1995).

- We particularly support the intention to improve 'parents' and young people's perceptions, aspirations and confidence in the options open to them'. The work of one of us (Wikeley, 2003) confirms that while parents and young people want to have faith in their schools, the uncertainty of the currency of new vocational qualifications works against this.
- Our experience suggests that the effectiveness of Individual Learning Plans (2.3.1) are greatly enhanced by the discussion between the personal tutor and the learner in order to articulate the means of achieving the goals set (Bullock & Wikeley, 2004). We feel that this link should be more explicit in the document
- We commend the use of the word '*additional* support' in the second bullet point of 2.4.3. As mentioned above, we believe that where one-to-one tutoring is a universal entitlement, not labelling those who are vulnerable or at risk, it is more effective.
- In 2.4.5, if 'rigorous self assessment and review' is to be worthwhile it needs to be underpinned by one-to-one discussion. Similarly, an Individual Learning Plan needs to be very carefully supported and progress systematically reviewed if it is not to become the goal rather than the means for learning (Bullock & Wikeley, 2001).

Kate Bullock March
2005
Felicity Wikeley
Department of Education, University of Bath

References

Bullock, K., Jamieson I. & Wikeley, F. (1995) *Report of the Evaluation of the Compact Extension Programme in Wiltshire,* University of Bath: Mimeo

Bullock, K. and Wikeley, F. (2000) *Final Report on the Evaluation of Personal Learning Planning in Cambridgeshire Schools* Cambridgeshire Careers Guidance Ltd/Dept. of Education and Employment

Bullock, K.M. & Wikeley, F. (2001) 'Personal Learning Planning: Strategies for Pupil Learning', *Forum,* 43 (2) pp .67-69

Bullock, K. & Wikeley, F. (2004) *Whose Learning? The Role of the Personal Tutor,* Maidenhead: Open University Press ISBN: 033521407X

Wikeley, F. (2003) *Parental involvement in a time of transition: Experiencing Educational Reform 'It's not bad'* Paper presented to the European Conference for Educational Research, Hamburg

APPENDIX 4

Publication 7

Bullock, K. & Wikeley, F. (2004) *Whose Learning? The Role of the Personal Tutor,*

Maidenhead: Open University Press ISBN: 033521407X